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Article

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Abstract: Myth has become a fundamental frame of reference for Western thinking. This paper explores the term and category “myth” from the perspective of folklore studies, with concern for the use of myth as a tool in research. The ways in which myth has been used in both academic and popular discourses are discussed. These are viewed in a historical perspective against the backdrop of the origins of the modern term. Attention is given to how historical patterns of use have encoded “myth” with evaluative stance-taking, building an opposition of “us” versus “them” into myth as something “other people” have, in contrast to us, who know better. Discussion then turns to approaching myth as a type of story. The consequences of such a definition are explored in terms of what it does or does not include; the question of whether, as has often been supposed, myth is a text-type genre, is also considered. Discussion advances to aesthetic evaluation at the root of modern discussions of myth and how this background informs the inclination to identify myth as a type of story on the one hand while inhibiting the extension of the concept to, for example, historical events or theories about the world or its origins, on the other. Approaching myth as a type of modeling system is briefly reviewed—an approach that can be coupled to viewing myth as a type of story. Finally, discussion turns to the more recent trend of approaching mythology through mythic discourse, and the consequences as well as the benefits of such an approach for understanding myth in society or religion. There are many different ways to define myth. The present article explores how different approaches are linked to one another and have been shaped over time, how our definition of myth and the way we frame the concept shape our thinking, and can, in remarkably subtle ways, inhibit the reflexive application of the concept as a tool to better understand ourselves.

Keywords: myth; mythology; folklore; history of research; theory; ideology

1. Introduction

The concept of myth has emerged as a fundamental frame of reference for Western thinking about the world and about how people in different cultures structure their experiences of the world. Mythology fascinates, delights, and inspires, even in our increasingly digital era. Although interest ebbs and flows, myth never seems to go completely out of fashion, and popular interest is now gaining momentum again, especially across the past decade. In research, myth is a key concept in fields ranging from Folklore Studies and Philology to Political Science and Consumer Culture Theory. For most researchers in the Humanities, the concept is simply a mooring post, a collective frame of reference for discussion (*A lost Greek myth becomes the center of the novel’s plot . . . ; Historical facts have been subordinated to a foundation myth of the nation . . .*). For many others, myth comes into focus because it is prominent in a particular field, such as Classical Studies or the ethnography and anthropology of modern India. There are a remarkable number of researchers specializing in the mythology of a particular culture, period, or as a phenomenon in comparative study; they are simply scattered rather than united under a common disciplinary field. What might seem surprising is that how myth is used in scholarship and the research questions surrounding it generally reflect and reinforce aspects of scholars’ own cultural

worldview.¹ The very word *myth* is so deeply encoded with ideological and evaluative stances that these remain largely subliminal. The challenge to the humanities presented by myth is to develop a reflexive awareness of the term and concept, both in order to refine it as an analytical tool and also to recognize ways in which the worldview we have inherited has structured and limited our thinking.

Since “Mythology Studies” never took root as an independent discipline with institutional status, both empirical and theoretical research has been scattered across fields. As a consequence, discussions of myth are fragmented, not only in the present but also in the past. The term and concept *myth* is a valuable tool with wide-ranging applications, but it tends to be grasped intuitively rather than analytically. The discussion of analytical approaches has historically been so dispersed that scholars in one field are often only superficially aware of alternatives, while anyone setting out to explore those alternatives will find their diversity bewildering to navigate. The aim here is to help clear the haze around the term myth and the sometimes different but related concepts it is used to describe. The focus is on how myth is understood and defined, how such definitions may impact our research and our thinking, and how a researcher can choose the definition best suited for a particular investigation. This essay is thus concerned with *what* myths are, and more specifically with the construction of myth as a category and how to make that category an effective research tool. It is not concerned with questions of why we have myths, where they come from, how they work, what makes them important to individuals, communities, or societies, whether they are necessary, or any number of other interesting questions that could be brought into focus. On the one hand, the answers to these questions are to a greater or lesser degree dependent on what we identify as myths. On the other hand, unless the who, where, when, why, and how of myths connect with our definition of what myths are, the answers to these questions cannot be expected to be the same for all myths, or even for all myths of a certain type.

Amid the myriad of approaches to myths and theories about them, most definitions, whether implicit or explicit, fall into one of two broad groups or span across them. The two main types of definition are distinguished according to their central criteria. The first addresses myth as a type of story, although what precisely is identified as making a story a myth varies considerably. The second is that myth is a type of model for thinking or understanding, again qualified in different ways—either in combination with story as a criterion or independent of it. A relatively recent approach that has developed alongside these has shifted the emphasis from myths themselves to mythic discourse—or mythology as it is used, manipulated, and communicated in society. This has allowed researchers to sidestep the riddle of defining myth, while bringing mythic discourse into focus also raises issues about how myth is defined. The following discussion is organized according to these three groups, but starts by considering the implicit “othering” that has historically been built into the use of the word “myth” and that continues to structure our thinking today. The criterion of story is historically the oldest and continues to predominate, so I will address it first. This criterion presents a number of subtle issues that are evident from the perspective of Folklore Studies and can significantly impact what is addressed as myth and how it is interpreted. Thinking about myth has already broken away from the story criterion in several fields and readers with such a background may prefer to skip this section, which gets a bit lengthy and might seem in places to be shooting at ghosts. The length of the discussion of story is owing to the orientation of this special issue, *The Challenge of Folklore to the Humanities*, to a broad audience. We are still in the wake of the era of disciplinary separatism, and it remains disturbingly common for researchers to have ideas about other fields and topics closer to what was current in the 1960s than today, allowing one discipline’s ghosts of theory and methodology to be alive and well in another and in popular discourse. The length is also affected by concern for how the criterion of story has participated in structuring the “othering” of myth in relation to ideologies of knowledge, subtly shaping what does or does not qualify as a myth—whether in the popular extreme

¹ This sentiment has been similarly expressed by Catherine Bell concerning ritual (Bell 1997, p. 266).

of denying all myths in our own society, or in more nuanced approaches that see modern myths as, for example, distinctively compelling narrative paradigms in relation to which people reflect on and construct their own identities and experiences, or explore modern counterparts to gods and their stories in the images and accounts of historical persons and characters of popular fiction. Treating mythology as a modeling system has evolved considerably with changing research paradigms and the emergence of new approaches. These will not be extensively reviewed here because their diversity is not relevant to developing definitions of myth today. Instead, primary attention is given to relevant theorization of myth from a semiotic perspective during the second half of the 20th century. The essay then turns to approaches to mythic discourse, its potential implications for developing a definition of mythology, and its productivity as a research tool. Irrespective of how the concept is understood, the use of myth in research generally lacks complementary tools for more sensitive analysis. In the penultimate section, relevant tools developed in Folklore Studies are introduced and formalized.

When preparing this essay, I was asked what makes the approach here specifically one of Folklore Studies as opposed to Religious Studies, Anthropology, Psychology, or some other field. Approaches to myth tend to blend, blur, and transfer across closely related disciplines. At the same time, disciplinary emphasis has led particular fields to greater developments in certain aspects of research, of which researchers in other fields may be unaware. People from outside the field tend to imagine Folklore Studies through what the discipline was half a century or more ago, but the discipline has been reinvented since then. Folklore had initially been conceived as something found among peasants and in “primitive” cultures, retreating before the culture of modern, scientifically educated folklore collectors. A reflexive turn led to the deconstruction of seeing folklore as “other.”² This happened alongside a shift in focus to variation in situated practice as opposed to text continuity and constructing ideal texts from traditions, reinventing them as heritage objects. Today, folklore can generally be described as knowledge and forms of expression that (a) engage the imagination and/or aesthetic principles (distinguishing folklore from how to build a fire or simply to speak a language); and (b) are socially mediated and negotiated within social groups, resulting in variation (rather than having hegemonic standards maintained by an impersonal institution like a school system or Church). A perspective from Folklore Studies brings myths into focus as sources of meaning in communication and understanding, attending to situations of use and variation. Research emphasis has concentrated predominantly on oral performance cultures. Codified written works like the Bible have been kept in dialogue, but, rather than focusing on these as static texts, the attention either shifts to how people interact with them and the discourse surrounding them in particular societies, or to the earlier folklore that has been incorporated into them or contributed to their evolution.

The perspective here is more specifically based in Finnish Folklore Studies, which has a stronger linguistic emphasis than other national scholarships: it might be described as approaching folklore as systems of signification for communication and understanding.³ Its mythology research has been impacted by the prominent position of Finno-Karelian mythological epic, incantations, and ritual poetry in the so-called Kalevala-meter (oral poetry from which the national epic *Kalevala* was built by Elias Lönnrot), a massive corpus, in which definitions of myth as story can be problematic. The corpus is so large that researchers have long struggled to come to terms with synchronic variation, a driving factor in the turn to an approach through mythic discourse (see especially Siikala [1992] 2002). Myths and whole mythologies may be abstracted for research purposes. In discourse, however, mythology is not static but dynamic; in the words of Anna-Leena Siikala, it is like a “kaleidoscope, in perpetual motion” (Siikala 2012, p. 19). As work on mythic discourse has given increasing attention to encounters between mythologies or religions, their interaction, and their ability to exist side by side, new tools for analysis have been developed and definitions of myth and mythology have been critically reassessed.

² Emblematic of this turn is Alan Dundes’ article “Who Are the Folk?” (Dundes [1977] 1980).

³ In contrast, American Folklore Studies includes the spectrum of forms of aesthetic expression that may be socially meaningful but do not constitute systems of signification, such as folk music and foodways.

2. What Makes a Myth a Myth?

What is a myth? If you were to ask 10 random people, they would all likely be able to answer in one sentence, and every answer would be different. Some answers would try to define or describe what a myth is, perhaps with something like:

- *It's a story about gods.*
- *A story from another religion.*
- *A myth's what people think happened when the world was created.*
- *Something people believe but isn't true.*
- *A weird idea that doesn't hold up to Science.*

Others would try to illustrate what a myth is by example, like:

- *That Thor fished the World-Serpent out of the sea and killed it.*
- *That God created the world in six days—it must have taken at least a week!*
- *That your toes can get cut off by steel-toe boots.*
- *A myth is that all Muslims are terrorists, that there are equal opportunities for education, honest lawyers, the American Dream; stuff like that.*
- *Global warming.*

We like to imagine that myth is more formalized as a term and concept in research. This is an illusion that emerges from researchers learning and internalizing the concept and use of the word through the discourse of their particular field. The grasp of myth normally remains intuitive, without explicit definition, and popular use easily slips into discussion. For instance, in Old Norse Studies (i.e., research on Viking and Medieval Scandinavian language, literature, and culture), the term myth has established conventions of use. Scholars in the field learn which stories are myths and which are not, but the things called myths reflect groupings of source materials that developed during the 19th century, without theoretical or empirical criteria.⁴ Within disciplinary discussion, uses of myth seem fairly uniform. However, they are based on conventions of the field rather than on scientific principles and are inconsistent with uses in other disciplines. Finnish folklorists have tended to work with much larger corpora than the medieval Norse sources and the size of those corpora require addressing huge ranges of variation. Such variation has affected how scholars conceive of a particular myth. In the past, when folklore research was oriented to reconstructing the *Urform* or “original form” of a story or song, they gathered all of the examples that they could find and the myth was the ideal, hypothetical and historically remote story of which all variants are imperfect derivatives (e.g., Krohn 1926). When the idea of an *Urform* was debunked, the term myth evolved to refer to something much more abstract that underlies or unites multitudes of local and regional variants and interpretations. In practice, the diverse forms of contemporary tradition might be united by only a few images and motifs that people combined in different ways (see e.g., Tarkka 2012). Today, Finnish scholars dealing with mythology seem mainly to use the word myth when addressing the problem that the opposition between “myth” and “history,” which is deeply engrained in modern thinking, is not valid for pre-modern cultures. Myth is no longer presumed to be a story that is told, which has led to a distinct expression, “narrated myth” (e.g., Siikala [1992] 2002, p. 56), that would seem redundant to an Old Norse scholar. Generally, however, Finnish research dealing with mythology has moved away from talking about “myths” and is concerned with the “mythic,” whether as story, image, location, entity, conception, or something

⁴ For example, the text known as *Grímnismál* (“Speech of Grímnir”) (Neckel and Kuhn 1963; Larrington 2014) is discussed as a myth because it is mainly a speech of a god preserved in a collection of several texts that are categorized as myths. However, the events of *Grímnismál* belong to the world of human kings and heroes; like so many stories of that god’s activities in the era of mythic heroes, the same text would not have been classed as a myth were it preserved in a saga of the relevant king or dynasty.

else. Myth may be a practical term with regular use in a particular field, but its use has normally been shaped across the history of the discipline's discourse both by particular materials discussed and by the explicit or implicit analytical or interpretive frameworks employed. Consequently, it may seem rather idiomatic when viewed from another perspective.

Uses of the term and concept myth are heterogeneous in both popular and academic discourse, but the cacophony of their diversity is not random. More or less all uses hold that *myths are or were linked to socially established convictions*. Something is not usually called a myth unless it is connected to convictions about the world, how it works, or the agents and forces inhabiting it, whether in the present or in the past.⁵ As Ernst Cassirer has put it, myth is characterized by “the intensity with which it is experienced, with which it is *believed*—as only something endowed with objective reality can be believed” (Cassirer [1923–1929] 1955–1957, vol. II, p. 5, original emphasis). The convictions may narrowly concern supernatural beings like gods of a religion, in which case the edges of myth become fuzzy. For example, we may question whether all Greek and Roman stories about gods were “believed” or whether they only get called myths because belief was linked at some stage to the gods but not necessarily to all stories about them (Herran 2017). Similarly, we might question whether the creation of Genesis is “believed” as literally true or only as figuratively and symbolically so. The criterion of conviction is also applicable to things that could be called myths in our societies today, such as that governments in Nordic countries will take away foreign children, an idea circulated among Russians about Finland and among Lithuanians about Norway. The social aspect of myth distinguishes it from fantasy or delusion (Doty 2000, pp. 37–39),⁶ yet *myths are never universal but always myths-of*—myths of a culture, religion, society, or group: *myths are always myths of some people as opposed to others*. From here, two other features get foregrounded in conceptions of myth: (a) myth is a type of story; (b) myth is a type of thinking model. These two features are often combined, but myths may also be defined in terms of one irrespective of the other. Theoretical and analytical approaches to myth have in general been developed on the basis of a priori ideas about what myths are. A theorist or researcher has internalized these ideas and then refines and formalizes them, for example through abstract theoretical principles (e.g., structuralism) or in dialogue with an interpretive framework of the relationship of myths to society or what they “do” (e.g., functionalism, psychological approaches). The discussion that follows will concentrate on different aspects of the concept of myth and how it is defined rather than on analytical and interpretive frameworks per se.

In order to understand and navigate the diversity of uses of myth, it is first necessary to recognize that myth is a modern concept. The long-standing tendency has been to try to build an understanding of what myth is by looking at other cultures and defining the concept through descriptions of what unites things that we identify as myths, whether formally, socially, or from some other perspective. We easily lose sight of the fact that the categorization of certain things rather than others as myths is often inherited from earlier discussions in the field, where it may reflect text groupings and interpretations rather than natural categories. In order to understand the concept of myth, it is necessary to recognize that the category is of our own making and to look at its background and how it is used today in our own cultures, because it is in the modern milieu that the use of myth is centered and structured.

3. An Implicit Ideology of “Us” Versus “others”

The identification of something as a myth is most often encoded with contrastive evaluations as “other” versus “us” on the one hand and as “not-truth” versus “truth” on the other. In particular, intuitively based uses of myth are built on the implicit ideology that “we” possess true knowledge

⁵ There are peripheral cases, such as stories about gods that may always have been seen as humorous entertainment but get called myths by analogy (e.g., Frog 2014b), but these also connect with discourses of established convictions.

⁶ It is possible to find exceptions to myth as *necessarily* a social phenomenon. For example, the concept of “personal myth” is established in psychology for an individual’s autobiographical screen that conceals an actual past (Kris 1956), and qualifying the “myth” as “personal” distinguishes it from myth as a social phenomenon.

and understanding in contrast to “others” who have myths. The Vikings had myths, the Romans had myths, but “we” do not. If we discover a potential myth among us, we seek to demonstrate its validity, in which case it is not a myth; or we debunk it, showing that those who accept whatever the thing is are subscribing to a myth. The recent popular television series *MythBusters* epitomizes this attitude toward myths in our society. This implicit “othering” of myth can be described as a type of relational deixis. *Deixis* (with the adjectival form *deictic*) is a term from linguistics for words or phrases that refer to different things according to context, like *me, you, it, this, that*. Relational deixis refers to the structuring of usage of the word myth so that it entails an implicit relationship of “us” versus “other,” where who is “us” and who is “other” varies by context. This relational deixis between “us” as possessors of truth in contrast to “others” who possess myths was built into the word from its relatively recent (re)birth in the modern West.

The Classical Greek word *mythos* (“story, fable”) was appropriated during the era of Romanticism as a word for stories connected with non-Christian religions. The etymology of the word does not reflect the origin of the concept. Plato and Aristotle’s discussions of different categories of discourse and performance laid foundations for modern genre theory (Frog et al. 2016, pp. 18–19), but they were concerned with forms of expression, not categories of what was told in a story (Herran 2017, pp. 6–7). Greek philosophers’ discussions of contemporary stories about gods and associated understandings of the world emerged with a more general concern of whether they were factually true. Greek philosophy emerged through a new (if of unclear origin) model of the world as ideally ordered, operating through predictable patterns of causality rather than through the agency of gods. This model was accompanied by a conviction that the natural order could be accessed through logical reflection on empirical observation (which is not to say empirical testing; see also (Kirk et al. [1957] 1983)). The resulting universe was rational, so stories of gods and origins that seemed inconsistent with logical reflection got rejected; it was also ethical, leading gods to be reconceived in line with an ideal of perfection, so many stories became viewed as falsifications or even defamations of these ideal agents (e.g., Herran 2017, p. 67). Interpretations as allegory offered a means to resolve the tension surrounding whether valorized poets like Homer or poets more generally should be condemned for their false stories. However, these discussions engaged stories and understandings current in the writers’ *own societies*; they seem to correspond to a discourse of peaceful conversion or religious change in which competing ideas are contested, but the competing ideas are not treated as forming a category of “other” relative to the philosophers. On the other hand, concern for causality significantly impacted the history of mythology through reflections on the origins or motivations for gods and stories about them that have circulated or been reinvented across subsequent centuries (Herran 2017).

The early Greek discourse was then carried to Rome, where it was later carried through conversions to Christianity. Symbolic and allegorical interpretation ultimately inherited from the Greeks allowed the heritage of otherwise “pagan” Roman poetry and mythology to retain a valorized status (Brisson [1996] 2004). However, the poetry and mythology that was valorized remained linked to the Latin language and was centrally maintained as heritage and spread as such with Christianity. The spread of Christianity did not involve the adoption and reinterpretation of gods and stories from local religions. Although medieval Christian literature is vast, it exhibits no specific terminology for stories associated with non-Christian religions. There is no indication that the early medieval Church paid much attention to such stories, which seem not even to have warranted explicit censure, although ideas first found among Greek philosophers about the origins of such gods and religions continued to be used to discuss competing beliefs. The contrast between “us” and “pagan” or “heathen” as “other” was fundamental to Christian religious identity throughout the Middle Ages, yet there does not seem to have been a category corresponding to the modern concept of myth.

Regarding the background of the term, *mythos* had been used in Late Latin to refer to stories that were allegorical or fantastic; it meant “fable”, taking over uses of *fabula* (“narrative, story, a subject of common talk; fictitious story, fable”). Greek *mythos* (sometimes Latinized *mythus*) was reinvented when the use of the Latin *mythologia* changed. *Mythologia* was initially used in the sense of “story,

fable” and “interpretation of a fable.” It became linked (though not exclusively) to Classical mythology, especially through popular works titled *Mythologiae* (“Mythologies”).⁷ These “mythologies” were Christian allegorical readings of Classical stories of gods and the supernatural.⁸ In the 18th century, *mythologia* (French and German *mythologie*, English *mythology*) began shifting its meaning: it became a mass noun for stories of this type and associated ideas or beliefs; it could also be used in the singular for an associated grouping of such stories as a collection or more abstract body of them. The rise of the Age of Enlightenment valorized reason and critical inquiry alongside the spread of deism and ideas of natural religion. Non-Christian religions were reframed and opened to discussion without stigmatization or villainization as “pagan”; at the same time, European colonialism carried a backwash of accounts of other cultures, complete with their religions, stories, and practices. The reframing of non-Christian religions coincided with the movement to reconcile Christianity with enlightened thinking and corresponding attempts to deconstruct the miraculous of Christian traditions (see [Feldman and Richardson 1972](#); [Csapo 2004](#)). In the second half of the 18th century, *mythos* began to be used to refer to a fantastic story or event of a “mythology” (on earlier use, see also ([Feldman and Richardson 1972](#), p. xxi)). It seems the word spread first in German and then moved into French and English, where it was gradually vernacularized (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, English *myth* is first attested in 1830: ([Oxford English Dictionary 2017](#), s.v. “myth 1”). Discussions of *mythologia* as or explicating fantastic stories and mysterious events led to a reinvention of *mythos* for the mysterious or symbolic as opposed to the marvelous and literal. It began to designate things with a core of fact or other potential truth that “tradition [had] transformed into the miraculous” in contrast to the true happenings recounted in the Bible ([Tholuck 1836](#), p. 161). “The obscurity of myths” was the opposite of “the clearness of positive knowledge” ([Symonds 1895](#), p. 32). Whether true knowledge was seen as Christian or scientific, myth was invariably what was opposed to that knowledge.

This deictic foundation built into the word myth has been maintained through the present day. It is necessary to break free from this relational deixis, this presupposition that myths are exclusive to “other people,” if myth is to be effective as a tool in research. If the user of the word myth positions him- or herself as the possessor of true knowledge in contrast to others who have “myths,” calling something a myth entails an implicit evaluative judgement that it is “not true, false” and asserts an asymmetry between the “us” of the speaker or writer and the “other” who has myths. “We” have an implicit authority and superiority as possessors of true knowledge, and our ideology presumes that false knowledge of myth should be discarded and replaced. This stance does not mean living myths do not have meaning or relevance in society today; it concerns how people view things that they consciously identify as myths. It seems to have evolved in relation to Christian religious ideas as a sort of platform for the ideology that scientific knowledge is superior to all other knowledges, which should be discarded in its wake. Superiority of knowledge was generalized as superiority of culture, validating, among other things, colonialism. Perspectives and understandings of people having myths are devalued and marginalized, if they are allowed consideration at all, while the same ideology excludes consideration of myths in our own culture (or in the Bible).

The deixis of the term was established in the 19th century when the hegemonic Western identity was Christian: the gospel was truth, in relation to which all other religions had myths (see e.g., [Murray \[1960\] 1969](#)). The sharp contrast between myth and gospel has been maintained in popular discourse.⁹

⁷ Especially that of Fabius Planciades Fulgentius produced around A.D. 500 ([Fulgentius n.d.](#)) and the corresponding work *Natalis Comes* published in 1567 ([Comes \[1567\] 1584](#)), both of which were widely read and were among the most important sources of knowledge of Classical mythology.

⁸ The word is also found, for example, in the title of the anonymous, encyclopedia-like *Mythologiae Christianae, sive virtutum et vitiorum vitae humanae imaginum libri tres* (“Christian Mythologies, or Three Books of Images of the Virtues and Vices of Human Life”) published in 1619 ([Anonymous 1619](#)), attributed to Johann Valentin Andreae, for example in the ban by the Church ([Anonymous 1876](#), p. 10).

⁹ In English, this holds even at the level of idiom, where just as saying something is a “myth” labels it false, saying something is “gospel” labels it unequivocal truth.

Even today, the word myth is not commonly used in connection with Christianity, although people may reject stories of the Bible for atheistic scientific thinking. These patterns of use generated momentum through the word's history, and can shape our thinking about myth and affect the materials included in an investigation.

Robert A. Segal observes a broad trend in the development of discussions of myth and would assign this deixis to what he calls the 19th-century approach to myth, which is dominated by interpretations of myths as about the physical world, accounting for it and controlling it like a primitive counterpart to science. He distinguishes this from what he calls the 20th-century approach, resulting from a turn in which interpretations became concerned not with the physical world but with psychological and social worlds, allowing myths to be viewed as complementary to science (Segal 2013). The deixis of myth was built into the term and its use during the earlier phase of discussion, from which it has maintained remarkable momentum. As will be discussed in the following section, that momentum has endured in part owing to how defining myth as a type of story has subtly reinforced myth's deixis. Many theorists now consider myth to have a relevance in society that is complementary to science, but the oppositions I foreground remain remarkably widespread, built into the discourse on myth, and they are little recognized. I stress it here because the way myth has been used affects our ability to use it as a tool to explore our own myths (as distinct from using myths of others to explore ourselves). The ability to reflexively apply the concept seems only to have been carried with postmodernism (e.g., Barthes [1957] 1972; Eliade [1957] 1975; Eliade [1963] 1968), which brought significant contributions to the development of myth as an analytical tool.

In order to make myth a more effective tool for research, it is necessary not only to deconstruct and reflect on these aspects of how the term gets used, but also to reflexively consider ideologies of our own cultures that may color our views. Scientific knowledge has become the current hegemonic standard of truth, with a deep-running ideology that truth is dependent on validation through empirical verifiability. Empirical verifiability is not always possible, in which case theory based on reason with a comprehensive account of both the available empirical data and other theories stands in for empirically verifiable truth. In the history of human knowledge, this ideology is only in its infancy; our cultures' untempered dogmatic stance with regard to it is comparable to the zealotry of the recently converted. In contrast, "the 'verification' or 'validation' of myth involves procedures which go beyond empirical tests" (Carnes 1967, p. 125), procedures that our knowledge ideology does not recognize. Similarly, Christians maintain distinct validation procedures of personal "faith" for religious truth and reject the criterion of empirical verifiability in that area of life. Perhaps ironically, truth of knowledge is linked to empirical verifiability generally rather than to *personal verification* thereof. The greater portion of our experience with such knowledge is filtered through discourse traced back to people or sources we consider authoritative (e.g., relatives, teachers, doctors, textbooks, news media), but most often at a remove from empirical verification per se. In other words, our knowledge of truth tends to be mediated through authorities and specialists in knowledge of different kinds. These systems of mediation play a role in maintaining the idea that scientific truth excludes false knowledge: false knowledge that is revealed is not attributable to science, but to mediators of knowledge or to people who validated it. Ideology produces conviction rather than providing a demonstration; the conviction that we lack myths in modern societies has been described as a "myth of mythlessness"—the myth that our society has no myths (Jewett and Lawrence 1977). This ideology blinds us to myths in our own cultures and colors how we view myths in others. Myth is most effective as a tool for research when it is elevated above the "us"—"other" deixis and handled with greater objectivity. Then it becomes possible to reassess and define myth critically for use in an investigation, conscious of how the baggage associated with the word might interfere with our thinking.

4. Are Myths Stories?

The widespread use of "myth" to refer to a type of story has made story a criterion of many definitions, and most theoretical and analytical approaches to myth have been developed on an

priori assumption that myths are stories (e.g., Doty 2000, pp. 42–49; see also (Segal 2014, pp. 3–5)). As a formalized criterion, story seems straightforward, easy to grasp, and aligns with popular use and intuition. Story is also etymologically consistent Greek *mythos* (“story”) as the origin of the word, although the word was already being used abstractly when its modern usage took shape in the 19th century. Defining myth in terms of story narrows and tightens the range of use in a way that is most effective for text-based studies dealing with corpora of stories, as in Old Norse studies.

4.1. The Descriptive versus Prescriptive Problem

How myth is defined shapes how we think about evidence of mythology in a particular culture or religion. On the one hand, a definition provides a thinking tool for reflecting on materials under scrutiny. An illustrative example can be taken Mircea Eliade’s definition of myth as narration that “relates an event that took place in primordial Time [...] myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence,” whether that reality is the creation of the world or some minor thing within it (Eliade [1963] 1968, pp. 5–6). As a tool, this definition can be applied to stories of the Viking Age settlement of Iceland and establishment of its society that were written beginning from the mid-12th century and especially in the 13th.¹⁰ The definition becomes a lens through which the settlers appear in the role of “Supernatural Beings” (Eliade [1954] 1991, p. 10), a perspective that might be fruitfully applied to how medieval writers talk about these people and construct their identities. Eliade’s emphasis on myths as stories that account for some sort of origin may equally limit the material included in discussion and shape interpretations. Thor fishing for the World Serpent does not seem to produce any new reality, while every story about a stone split by the thunder-god striking it would qualify as a myth. Eliade’s definition seems to exclude an adventure of cosmological proportions while including countless stories that would qualify as local legends. Conversely, using this definition can drive interpretation if we shift from treating it as *descriptive* to treating it as *prescriptive*. In other words, most of us presume that Thor’s fishing adventure is a myth; if myth is defined as by Eliade, then the story must account for the origin of something or we have to let go of the idea that the story is a myth. Saying it is not a myth seems counter-intuitive, and may thus motivate an alternative solution of linking the story to an origin of something, qualifying it as a myth—a myth according to this definition.

The applicability of Eliade’s definition may be further complicated when looking at traditions of cultures outside of Eurasia, for example in Sub-Saharan Africa, Austronesia, Australia, or South America. It is common to see stories of the origin of the world as emblematic of myths, but this perspective is Eurocentric: it has taken shape especially in relation to mythologies of Indo-European cultures, cultures of the Mediterranean, and to a lesser extent cultures of Asia. Elsewhere, as E.J. Michael Witzel puts it, “The question of how the universe and the world came into being is simply not asked” (Witzel 2012, p. 289). This does not mean that the society is without stories of supernatural beings and their adventures, only that they may not conform to our expectations. Problems arise when a priori definitions begin to reconstruct data in misleading ways and drive interpretations. For example, research on Finno-Karelian mythologies in the first half of the 20th century struggled with the Classical division between gods and heroes. The solution was to propose that certain gods and heroes happened to have the same names or that their names had become confused over time, so there was a god Ilmarinen and a hero Ilmarinen, a god Ahti and a hero Ahti, and so on (e.g., Krohn 1932). No one stopped to consider the vernacular categories, where the word for “god,” *jumala*, could also be used for a sufficiently powerful ritual specialist in the local community (Jauhainen 1998, type D1).

¹⁰ The settlement of Iceland is especially interesting as a foundation myth. Not only does it account for the formation of a new society that eventually culminates in the legal conversion to Christianity, but also the situations connected with the beginning of immigration to Iceland form the transition from mytho-heroic to historical time.

The sharp divide between hero and god was not valid here, and forcing invalid distinctions on the traditions resulted in misrepresentations.

A very specific definition like Eliade's may work well for certain materials and certain studies, but less well for others. A hazard that it and other definitions pose is that we already "know" certain stories are myths. Consequently, rather than using the definition as a tool for identifying myths or to reflect on how particular stories compare and contrast with a descriptive definition as an ideal frame of reference, we instead slide into the circularity of using interpretation to conform myths to the definition. A similar problem can arise when applying such a definition in the identification of myths, for example if it is markedly Eurocentric when addressing an Austronesian tradition, or if Eurocentric ideas are forced on the material, like a clear distinction between god and hero where none exists.

4.2. Unnarrated Events and a Case of Fragmented Cosmogony

When myths are defined as stories, we may see stories where there are none. Old Norse mythology is filled with countless examples of brief references to mythic events, dozens of which have been preserved. Where these cannot be identified with preserved narratives, identifying myths as stories leads scholars to consider them as *either* referring to contemporary stories that were lost *or* inventions for the particular poem by, for example, a scribe. A middle ground of things that may happen in mythic time but lack narration remains beyond the scope of consideration: either it is a myth and thus a story or it is not a myth and thus an invention from outside of the mythology. Limitations of a medieval corpus allow only glimpses of the mythology, so the either/or hypothesis never appears inconsistent with the data. Where a tradition is better documented, a simple either/or view may become unsustainable. Thousands of examples of Finno-Karelian kalevalaic poetry on mythological subjects are preserved along with a far larger and partly overlapping corpus of incantations and ritual poetry. In epics, it is claimed that the smith Ilmarinen forged heaven, as in the following verses:

<i>"Olisi seppo omilla mailla</i>	<i>"There would be a smith in my own lands</i>
<i>Ei olis seppää selvempää</i>	<i>There would not be a smith more clear</i>
<i>Takojata tarkempoa</i>	<i>A forger more accurate</i>
<i>Se on taivosta takonu</i>	<i>He has forged the [vault of] heaven</i>
<i>Ei tunnu vasaran jälki</i>	<i>A trace of the hammer is not perceived</i>
<i>Eikä pihtien pitemät"</i>	<i>Nor marks of the tongs"</i>
<i>(SKVR 1908–1997, vol. I₁, item 79a, ll. 118–223, punctuation removed).</i>	

The forging of heaven is well attested on a widespread basis and we are intuitively inclined to identify it as a myth. The event is presented as emblematic of Ilmarinen's skill, as his greatest feat, and as affirmation of his participation in the creation of the world. It works as an attribution of power and authority in epic dialogue, with corresponding use in incantations (Tarkka 2013, pp. 226–36). The difficulty is that there was no story: it was not narrated independently, and sometimes could be as brief as a single clause in a verse like *joka taivosen takopi* ("who forged heaven") (SKVR 1908–1997, vol. I₁, item 64, l. 32). Moreover, the event has no place in the narrative of the creation of the world, and this claim, embedded in other contexts, is the only assertion that Ilmarinen even participated in that stage of the cosmogony. Martti Haavio thus describes the forging of heaven as "a mini-myth [...] actually only a reference to a myth" (Haavio 1967, p. 137). I have argued elsewhere that the reference is historically rooted in an earlier form of the cosmogony, prior to a radical restructuring of the mythology during the Iron Age under Scandinavian influence. This would have been after the introduction of iron-working technology had penetrated the mythology but before the inherited Uralic sky-god **Ilma* > *Ilmarinen* was displaced from his central role (Frog 2012, pp. 210–18; 2013b, §3; 2017a, §2). If this is correct, there quite probably was a story about Ilmarinen forging heaven. However, that story would have belonged to a different mythology, a mythology prior to changes that took place during the Viking Age or earlier—i.e., roughly a thousand years before extensive 19th-century documentation of the mythology. It is possible that, across the centuries, individual people might have made up a

story about the event, but, if this happened, no such story seems to have been established socially. In other words, it looks like there was no story about the forging of heaven in Finno-Karelian tradition for centuries, and that no such story was ever established in the post-transformation mythology.

Fragmented mythology of cosmogony is not as unusual as we might imagine; it simply gets concealed beneath the inclination to reconstruct mythologies as coherent. For example, one kalevalaic epic describes a contest of knowledge between the demiurge Väinämöinen and young Joukahainen, in which the latter claims first-hand knowledge of the creation of the world. Väinämöinen rejects this claim as a lie and repeats the claims as his own first-hand knowledge of these events, winning the competition, as in the following example:

<i>Sanoi siitä Väinämöinen</i>	Said about that Väinämöinen,
<i>“Lapsen on mieli, vaimon tunti</i>	“Child’s mind, woman’s lore
<i>Ei oo partasuun urohon</i>	Not for a bearded hero
<i>Omat on kolkot kuokkimani</i>	Mine the scooping of dark places
<i>Vuoret luomani kokoh</i>	Mountains my creation into heaps
<i>Kala hauat kaivamani</i>	Fish-hollows my digging
<i>Olin miekin miessä siellä</i>	Indeed I as a man was there
<i>Urohona kolmantena</i>	As a third hero
<i>Seitschemäntenä urossa</i>	As a seventh hero
<i>Kaarta taivon kantaissa</i>	Bearing the arch of heaven
<i>Pieltä ilmon pistäissä</i>	Sticking the post of the sky
<i>Taivoista tähittäissä</i>	Starring the heavens
<i>Otavaa ojentamassa”</i>	Straightening Ursa Major”

(SKVR 1908–1997, vol. I₁, item 185, ll. 26–38, punctuation removed).

Here we correlate Väinämöinen’s claims with the “myth” of the creation of the world, which describes how he drifted on the primal sea, shaped the sea floor and shoreline, created the sun and moon from an egg, and so forth (Frog 2012, pp. 222–27; Kuusi 1949, pp. 156–70). This correlation has validity in the northeastern tradition areas, where the connection between the two epics may even be observable at a textual level. In this case, the verse *kalahauat kaivamani* (“fish-hollows my digging”) corresponds to the verse telling that Väinämöinen *kalahauat kaivatteli* (“fish-hollows was digging”) in this singer’s way of singing the creation epic (SKVR 1908–1997, vol. I₁, item 79, l. 21). Elsewhere, however, the connection is generalized from a reconstructive perspective. The knowledge competition is among the most widely found mythological epics ((Sarmela 2009, pp. 547–50) and map 91). In several regions where this epic was sung, Väinämöinen had been dropped from the cosmology, as is true in the following example, where the boasts had no more place in the creation of the world than Ilmarinen’s forging of heaven:

<i>“Muistan meret kynnetyxi</i>	“I remember the seas being ploughed
<i>Sarka jaot sauvvotuxi</i>	Field divisions being rowed (lit. “poled”)
<i>Ilma pielet pistetyxi”</i>	The sky’s pillars being set”

(SKVR 1908–1997, vol. XII₁, item 8, ll. 17–19, punctuation removed).

To complicate matters, the widely found claims in this example of “ploughing seas” or “rowing fields” lack direct counterparts in versions of the creation epic. The world pillar or pillars holding the sky are also generally absent from the creation epic, as is Ursa Major (Kuusi 1949, pp. 168–70). We might speculate that the world pillar and constellation of Ursa Major are of such cosmological significance that they must have been narrated at some point, but when? When Ilmarinen still had a role in the creation of the world? In an epic of setting the forged vault of heaven on a pillar and fixing the stars in place? In addition, things like *urohona kolmantena* (“as a third hero”) are common in claims of first-hand cosmogonic knowledge (Tarkka 2013, pp. 226–36), and even if parallelism obscures the number of participating heroes (third/ /seventh), the heroes involved are clearly plural. However, Väinämöinen is the only agent present in the creation epic (see Frog 2012, pp. 156–70). Put simply, the

boasts in the singing competition and their parallels used in incantations seem like they are referring to a different cosmogony.

Being able to trace the history of the reference back to a remote period established continuity from that period and the function-specific (i.e., as an emblem of Ilmarinen's skill, power, and authority) suspension of reference to a mythic event that otherwise had no place in the cosmogony. The identification of such suspended elements is often problematic without a comparably extensive corpus. Old Norse poets and audiences seem to have delighted in references to mythic events, which can make up the body of whole poems.¹¹ Many such references are to events that are attested as independent narrations; many others presumably were narrated independently as well, although we lack sources to corroborate this. However, some of these references may have been established in the tradition without independent narration. The reference might have been established in an earlier period but the story dropped out of use, as in the Finno-Karelian examples. The Old Norse references are often stanza-like units used in dialogue or monologue: a mythic event allusively referenced in an insult could quite possibly have been transferred from one god to another. In this case, a basic type of variation could disconnect it from a potential story in its background and allow it to become established as a mythic event without an associated narrative. The background of others might remain obscure, even if we had a rich corpus of hundreds of examples no less than "ploughing seas" or "rowing fields" above. This is not simply an issue of how we conceive of story: by thinking of myth as a story-type, we look for or simply presume a story that may be nothing more than a mirage produced by our definition of myth.

4.3. Scenarios and Processes

The proposition that myth is by definition a story might be accommodated by stretching the definition. Treating story in a broad sense as any subject with a predicate such as *Ilmarinen forges heaven* opens the door to the cases above. Such a definition would also open the door to elements of mythology that are processual rather than atomic events. In Old Norse tradition, the fingernails of a deceased individual had to be trimmed before departure to the otherworld or the trimmings from their nails would contribute to the construction of a mythic ship Naglfari—a ship that will be completed at the end of the world, when it will set sail for the apocalyptic battle of the gods (([Snorri Sturluson 1982, 1987](#)), *Gylfaginning*, chp. 51). The connection between Naglfari and clipping nails in preparation might be compared to E.B. Taylor's rumination: "When the attention of a man in the myth-making stage of intellect is drawn to any phenomenon or custom which has to him no obvious reason, he invents and tells a story to account for it" ([Taylor \[1871\] 1920](#), p. 392). Concerning fingernails, however, there seems not to have been much to tell, and, rather than formally narrated, the construction of Naglfari was probably referenced in discourse with statements like *We have to cut his fingernails or they will be used to build Naglfari*. Similarly, according to the Talmud, a finite number of souls were created, a number that is depleted with each birth, and the Messiah will only come once the last of these is born ([Babylonian Talmud n.d.](#), *Yevamot*, chps. 62a, 63b). As with Naglfari, the progressive depletion of created souls connects with the event of the Messiah's coming that is narrated. However, the depletion of souls seems to have been something referred to and addressed in discourse rather than told as a story per se. The question arises: are these disqualified as myths because they are only linked to stories rather than being stories themselves, or should they be considered story-myths because they are, at core, scenarios (i.e., stories) that *could be* told as narratives? An open interpretation of story that will include Ilmarinen's forging of heaven, the ongoing building of Naglfari, or the depletion of souls as myths might be seen as stretching the concept of story so far that it ceases to be useful, and it is better to

¹¹ Prominent examples are the inventories of mythic knowledge in the poems known as *Völuspá*, *Völuspá inn skamma* and *Vafþrúdnismál*, as well as the exchanges of boasts and insults in the poems known as *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna* ([Neckel and Kuhn 1963](#); [Larrington 2014](#)).

exclude such cases from the category. Alternately, have we been drawn into the circularity of imposing the criterion of story prescriptively on things that we intuitively identify as myths? Are we trying to fit the round hole of our definition to square pegs we consider to be myths?

Questions of how we classify processes and scenarios are particularly important when considering how we conceive of myths in pre-modern cultures and in our own cultures today. If a story is treated at a very abstract level comparable to an event or historical process, then the building of Naglfari and depletion of souls become considered myths as stories that climax with an eschatology. Mythology with a prominent eschatology easily maintains such connections between the present and that ultimate event in the future. Several such traditions are found in Old Norse in spite of the limitations of the sources, such as Odin's gathering of the slain warriors in Valhalla, where they fight all day and drink all night until they are needed in the battle of the apocalypse (([Snorri Sturluson 1982, 1987](#)), *Gylfaginning*, chps. 20, 36, 40–41, 51). If these are considered myths, what about corresponding processes that do not culminate in an eschatological event, such as Archangel Azrail's separation of each deceased individual's soul from his or her body in Islam (*Qur'an* n.d., 32:11), or valkyries selecting which warriors die on an Old Norse battlefield (([Snorri Sturluson 1982, 1987](#)), *Gylfaginning*, chp. 36)? How about if the recurrent element of the process has the equivalent of a narrative plot but is not retold as a story? Should we consider it a myth that, in Karelian tradition, a deceased individual undertakes a dangerous journey from the realm of the living to the otherworld, where the gates to the realm of the dead are opened, the guardian dog is silenced, and the ancestors receive that person with candles to integrate him or her into their community (orchestrated through ritual by lamenters: ([Stepanova 2011, 2014](#)))? In folklore archives, it is possible to find countless examples of single-sentence explanations under "etiological legends" or "origin myths." In Estonia, explanations for thunder include accounts like *Elias pidi tulise vankriga taevas sõitma, kui myristas*, "When it thunders, it is said that Elijah (*Elias*) drives in a fiery chariot" ([Valk 2012](#), p. 47), or *Välk olla pühakirja järele nimetud ära sööja tuli, mida Jumal inimestelaste karistamiseks maa pääle saata, et seega neile viimist kohtu päeva meele tuletada*, "The Holy Scripture says that lightning is a consuming fire (*ärasööja tuli*), sent by God to earth to punish people and remind them of the last judgement day" ([Valk 2012](#), p. 48). In the Finnish Literature Society's archives, with which I am most familiar, explanations for thunder indexed under "origin myths" (*syntytaru*; cf. ([Aarne 1912](#))) are often simple, descriptive statements with no plot. Is it a myth that thunder comes from a wagon in heaven or that lightning is sent by God as a punishment? Is the conception or the verbal explanation the myth? Or does such an explanation only qualify as a myth when there is a plot?

An oft-implicit feature of story-based definitions of myth is that the plot of the story is treated as unique to a *particular* myth, which has been a stumbling block to discussions of myth in modern cultures. Any reference to Thor fishing for the World Serpent is understood in terms of the same mythic event, not to a series of fishing adventures by the same or different gods. Modern cultures generally lack this type of myth outside of texts of organized religion. This sort of particular identity is instead connected with things assigned to different categories like events in history (the storming of the Bastille), fiction (Hamlet's death), or theory (evolution). The deixis of othering has excluded myth from these categories because they are structured by a general consensus of their truth status rather than as an opposition between some who subscribe to their truth as opposed to those who possess true knowledge. Things referred to as myths that are part of our own cultures tend to lack exclusivity: rather than being unique to a particular story or event, myth will designate a mythic plot or event-type that may be connected to different people and specific situations. Such myths may be told, referenced, or conceived as someone's experience, whether it be as grand as the American dream, which many people are said to have lived and to which many aspire, or as mundane as the idea that if you make funny faces your features will get stuck that way, which many parents happily use to control their children. In pre-modern cultures, the equivalent that recurs in the human world is not customarily considered a myth (in this special issue, see also ([Hansen 2017](#))). For example, there is a remarkably rich folklore prominent in cultures of the Baltic Sea region of the thunder-god striking

particular agents of chaos in present or recent times (trolls, devils, etc.) with innumerable variations of place, witnesses, situations, and, of course, countless troll-victims. Rather than myths, these are approached as examples of an event-type of the legend tradition. The stumbling block emerges from incommensurate categorizations for myth in both our own and pre-modern cultures that, for the most, part are intuitive and easily result in using the same word to talk about different things.

Conventions of discussion are significant here: Old Norse scholarship treats valkyries as belonging to mythology but stories about them tend to be treated contextually, for example as part of the epic tradition. Stories of valkyries choosing specific warriors for death in battle could equally be viewed through the same lens of traditional legends. The Archangel Azrail's or a Karelian lamenter's role in enabling the deceased to journey to the next world, on the other hand, is a recurrently instantiated event-type that falls outside of the terms and categories for discussing mythology. At the same time, we readily accept that similar patterns belong to another culture's mythology no less than that the thunder-god strikes trolls, devils, and other hostile supernatural beings, or that the theft or loss of a soul is a cause of illness in shamanic Siberian cultures. It is not considered a myth every time a shaman runs up the world pillar to visit the sky god or dashes underground to visit the world of the dead (see also [Eliade \[1964\] 2004](#)). However, like the story of a deceased individual's journey to the otherworld orchestrated through Karelian lament, a shaman's journey is no less a mythic event than an act of a god that gives form and meaning to a particular feature of the landscape. We may exclude what happens during the ritual from myth-as-story because it is in the process of occurring rather than being told. But if it is told afterward, does it then qualify as a myth? – as a story of social importance for a community characterized by conviction as something that has “really happened”? Or must we instead infer that the ritual enacts a myth as a primal story now lost in time? (See also [Segal 1998](#)). In a tradition where the shaman can meet and confront the god of the sky or the lord of the realm of death, if the shaman's deeds are not myths when being communicated through narration and performance to an audience within the framework of the ritual, do they advance to myth when they are recounted? If not, how do we distinguish these stories of confrontations with gods in the otherworld from the story of Elijah being swept off to heaven ([Bible n.d.](#), 2 Kings 2:1–18) or the countless Greek and Roman myths of encounters between gods and human beings? Is the difference between myth and not-myth whether a god is involved? What about if that category is not straightforward, as with *jumala* above, or in a culture where ancestral communities are engaged like gods ([Hultkrantz 1993](#), pp. 58–59; [Stepanova 2012](#), pp. 265–74; [2014](#), pp. 214–19)?

Of course, it is not necessary to treat any of these things as myths, but it is important to reflect on the concept. The definition we use may affect what is or is not included in an investigation or shape analysis and interpretation. What gets included as a myth is structured by the source materials and history of discussion. With mythologies addressed through medieval and earlier texts, it is very easy to talk about myths as complex and complete stories. The sources are written documents often presenting information in unbroken sequences of prose or verse, which researchers then reciprocally view as the ideal form for sources of mythology. Conversely, single-sentence explanations of thunder are products of dialogic interview contexts, in many cases probably answers to questions like *Where does thunder come from?* or *Have you ever heard anyone talk about why it thunders?*—sometimes on a written questionnaire. In an interview, the information about thunder striking a certain stone or the name “Thor's Road” might be only a few words as an aside or entangled in ongoing dialogue with multiple participants, filled with repetitions, objections, corrections and references to comparable events (noting that such dynamic discourse is also likely behind the field notes of many early folklore collectors). It is possible to study all of these phenomena using different terms, but the term and its definition organizes how we see it in relation to other things. The implications and consequences of the categories we use must be taken into account when preparing an investigation. Defining myth as a type of story is not “wrong,” but it is necessary to be conscious that this is a choice, as are the limits of what qualifies as a “story,” and that these choices have implications for our thinking and analysis.

4.4. Stories Versus Events

Approaching myths as stories is not unproblematic. Myths often operate in cultures as an extension of history, conceived in terms of events rather than tales. These events may be distinguished as happening before or after the world order of present human societies, but they constitute a category of knowledge that does not conform to our distinction of history as “real” and myth as “not real.” In a modern context, calling a myth a story carries the burden of knowledge ideologies that it is *only* a story. Segal stresses that “the story can be either true or false” (Segal 2014, p. 5), yet there is a significant categorical gap between story and event. Many would find it problematic and reductive to call Jesus’ crucifixion, Hitler’s suicide, or the sacking of Rome by the Vandals “stories.” When an event of history or a theory is shown to be false by science and reason, it is then reconceived as a story, a myth or legend, dismissed as invalid knowledge, maintaining the myth of mythlessness. This recently happened with statements about General Pershing’s execution of Muslims with bullets dipped in pig’s blood, which was shown not to have been an event in the world (Snopes n.d.). The gap between story and event is not epistemological; rather, story is discourse whereas an event is considered to have reality outside of discourse.

The story criterion works fine for discussions of non-Christian religions, but the gap between it and events can become an obstacle to considering myths in other contexts. Thinking first of myths as stories leads us to automatically exclude things that we would not call stories and thus may impact what can be addressed as myths in significant ways. For example, most people would say that the theory of the Big Bang is not a myth but a theory, and I doubt anyone would claim that a theory is a story. However, compare the following summaries:

Polytheism

In the beginning, there were a bunch of gods, and they had a problem, and some stuff happened, and that was how the world was created.

Monotheism

In the beginning, there was God, and He (or She) was only one God and there was nothing else. So one day He (or She) created the world, and that was the first day. And it’s all been downhill from there.

Atheism

It is unscientific to believe in God. In the beginning, there was just Nothing, and then one day—BOOM—there was a big explosion, and that’s where the universe comes from.

We conceive of the Big Bang not as a story but as an event. Like stories from different religions, huge numbers of people accept the theory of the Big Bang as the origin of the universe because authorities explain it that way. We see the Big Bang as superior to religious creation stories because it conforms to scientific thinking and rejects supernatural agency. However, the theory really comes down to speculation; there is no clear explanation for what would explode or why it would do so. In this respect, the Big Bang is on equal footing with other accounts of the creation of the world, the only difference being that those accounts of creation involve things that do not conform to other areas of scientific knowledge. On the other hand, the Big Bang would seem clearly inferior from the perspective of a cultural knowledge base with a principle that the world could not exist without agency or one with a principle of *ex nihilo nihil fit* (“nothing comes from nothing”), both of which shaped the thinking of early Greek philosophers (Kirk et al. [1957] 1983; Herran 2017). Making story a criterion for myth is relevant for many investigations, but the story category is incompatible with our category of true knowledge. A story can be true, but a story is conceived as narrative, as discourse. True knowledge may be mediated by narrative but the narrative remains distinct from knowledge: the truth of a story is its representation of something that exists independently of the story itself. This gap between our categories of story and knowledge reinforces the othering of myth as well as the so-called myth of mythlessness in our own cultures.

The gap between story and event has an additional dimension that can significantly impact our thinking. Events are considered to exist independent of discourse and can have complex networks of relations to one another. Story is a linearization of events to form a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. Not all events exhibit coherent plots, and thus may not be suitable to address as stories. A story may be a structured path linking events of a network into a linear chain with a particular logic and interpretation. However, that does not prevent us from linking events in other, potentially incompatible chains with different logic or other interpretations. Addressing all myths as stories reduces knowledge of mythic events to linear plots, which may not be universally valid, and may underestimate the degree to which certain events in mythic time may be understood through references in different contexts such as incantations, engagement in ritual, and so on.

To complicate matters, it has been common throughout the history of research on mythology to lift stories and other bits and pieces of information out of context and try to piece them together into a cohesive and coherent model. This trend has been especially common where variants are few, as in the Old Norse corpus, pulling bits from different poem and other sources to construct a unified model. Here, the discourse becomes identified or conflated with (false) knowledge and (fictional) events. The aim is to abstract an ideal model of a (fictional) world and its history without considering how people circulate and engage with the discourse. The issue rapidly becomes complicated in kalevalaic epic, as discussed above, as this sort of ideal integration is not fundamental to the tradition, where knowledge of mythic history was transmitted in a regular and stable narrative (short) epic form (e.g., Siikala [1992] 2002, p. 169). These epics clearly circulated as poems with textual identity, sort of like ballads (Frog 2016b, pp. 65–72). It is quite reasonable to address an individual epic as a story. Kalevalaic incantations are similarly built out of “precoded linguistic units” (Siikala [1992] 2002, p. 111) in real-time interactions with the unseen world, some of which correspond to or overlap with those in epics. In other words, a ritual specialist has learned conventional chunks of text for expressing his units of knowledge, for affecting particular unseen agents or forces, and for representing his own actions. The large corpus makes it evident that elements of cosmogony and their representations are linked to particular songs: they do not move freely between epics and can be maintained within a particular epic or in incantations while other epics change around them. As a consequence, specialists in mythic knowledge and associated ritual internalize diverse and sometimes inconsistent verbal representations of the same or linked events as well as knowledge of events like Ilmarinen’s forging of heaven that are not integrated into the chains of cosmogonic events as epic stories. An ideology of non-variation for the expression of mythic knowledge in verse stabilized poetic texts and differences between them (Frog 2016b, p. 66), but singers also recognized potential gaps between poetic representation and events they describe (Tarkka 2013, p. 266). Where a philologist would likely focus on the text *as* the knowledge, singers who relied on this knowledge more likely came to terms with such disparities through their own solutions.

The fragmentation of cosmogony across different epics and incantations might be compared to diverse and inconsistent records from which historians try to reconstruct a model of the past. In the region where Väinämöinen was upheld as the demiurge in the creation epic, references to the smith of heaven and the distinct boasts of the singing competition were also widely known from epic and important in ritual poetry (Tarkka 2013, chps. 17–20). Non-specialists may not even have been conscious of the diversity in references to and representations of cosmogony, whereas such knowledge provided instruments of power to specialists who could potentially develop a synthetic, integrated overview of the creation, a unified perspective on the tradition’s diversity (Converse 1964; Stepanova 2012, pp. 265–72; cf. Wright 1998, chp. 2). Whereas individual epics can be unambiguously approached in terms of myths as stories, a synthetic overview would be more comparable to myth as history, with a diversity of events situated in relation to one another. Of course, this situation with kalevalaic poetry is related to textual stability of the poetry in oral circulation; it might be very different for more flexible narrative forms. Nevertheless, it raises questions about the validity of mixing and matching things from different sources to rationalize a unified Old Norse cosmogony. The kalevalaic corpus offers

empirical evidence that long-standing assumptions about mythology's internal coherence should not be taken for granted. More significantly, the synthesis and interpretation of diverse and inconsistent textual representations in this tradition seem not to have been at a broad social level but rather at the level of individual specialists—individual specialists who could potentially distinguish between verbal representation in discourse and the mythic knowledge to which it referred.

4.5. *Is Myth a Genre?*

Treating myths as a type of story led myth to be very actively discussed in terms of genre, especially regarding how to differentiate myths, legends, and fairytales as traditional story types (e.g., Jolly 1920; Bascom 1965; see also (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Hansen 2017)). The question of myth as genre was certainly not a universal concern, but it was prominent among certain scholars and the discussion fed back into definitions of myth by situating them in relation to definitions for other types of story. Particularly in the first part of the 20th century, folklorists became increasingly concerned with distinguishing texts according to different categories that came to be called “genres”. Approaching myths as a type of story led to identifying myth as a genre. The question of whether myth is a genre depends on how genre is being defined. Historically, theories of folklore genres faced the problem that pre-established categories simply became identified as genres rather than genre first being established as a type of category, of which varieties could be found in folklore. Put simply, genre started off as a fancy word for a category of texts. Understandings of things like myths, jokes, and riddles started off as practical and intuitive rather than analytical categories. They were generally approached according to simplistic internal criteria rather than being organized in relation to one another, so it is not surprising that the criteria for calling something a myth were not comparable to those for jokes. These and many other categories were dubbed genres, but calling myths and jokes genres did not tell us anything meaningful about them except that they are categories.

In the wake of post-modernism, folklore scholars made a major leap from conceiving a genre like myth as an *etic* category of the researcher imposed on the material to recognizing *emic* or vernacular categories that could be learned or extrapolated from language and practices in the culture itself. The use of emic versus etic categories became a hotly debated topic (e.g., Ben-Amos 1976; Honko 1989). As stressed above, what categories are used plays a role in organizing data and structuring interpretations. A crucial issue is using categories cautiously, taking care to hold them up to evidence for comparison rather than to reshape evidence by defining it through the category. Emic categories are very important for gaining perspective on how traditions and conceptions operate within a culture; etic categories break up traditions and their elements in different ways, situating them in relation to traditions of other cultures. Emic and etic categories are relevant to different sorts of research questions.

A second major leap was in theorizing genre as a category of a particular type, so that genre categories are distinguishable according to commensurate criteria. Such models of genre have most often been on a dual basis, of which one aspect is formal and the other is either practice or what the form is used to express or do. If we take a two-aspect approach to genre, the formal aspect of myth could be identified as story, for example in the sense of an organized and coherent series of events with a beginning, middle, and end. If the second aspect is content, then the story could be about gods or set in a time or place outside of the present human world order (in this volume, see also (Hansen 2017)). If the second aspect is practice or what myth does in society, the function could be to provide (or to have provided) a model for understanding some aspect of the empirical, social or unseen worlds. In either case, we could argue that myth is a genre. Such a definition would exclude a variety of material discussed above. I prefer a four-aspect model of genre that includes conventions of (a) form, (b) content or enactment, such as what performance should affect socially or supernaturally, (c) practice, or who customarily uses it, under what conditions, and so forth, and (d) functions, or what the genre does in society and how it relates to other forms of expression and other genres (Frog 2016a, pp. 57–71). The four-aspect approach includes both aspects of content and function in

addition to form, not to mention practice, all resulting in a narrower definition. Conventions of practice would presumably vary considerably from culture to culture, but uses of myth might be proposed to always have constraints on what is and is not appropriate (further shaping the definition of the genre). At an abstract level, a case can be made for myth being a genre according to any of these models, but the argument becomes less straightforward when considered in relation to other genres.

Things we identify as myths can be expressed in different ways. For example, the story of Thor fishing for the World Serpent is preserved in the epic medium of an eddic poem, in prose, visually in several iconographic representations, and also in the medium of court poetry (so-called skaldic poetry) (Sørensen [1986] 2001). Formally, the diverse representations can be approached in terms of different genres, each with their own conventions of form, practice and functions, and the myth of the god's adventure appears as content expressed through each genre. Iconographic representation—i.e., presentation through pictures—highlights that myth is not limited to expression through language. Myth must therefore be considered fundamentally different from genres that describe types of text made of language like ballads, (verbal) riddles, and so forth. If we turn to emic genres, it is possible to find genres of texts made of language devoted to mythology. Kalevalaic epic is such a genre, although this was used alongside other narrative genres in the same poetic form and lacked a vernacular term to distinguish it; in some regions, the epic genre underwent a historical shift, converging with a non-mythological genre (Frog 2012, pp. 223–24; Siikala 1990, pp. 14–19; 2002, p. 28). In Old Norse, so-called eddic poetry exhibits at least two genres of mythological poetry. One of these was part of the epic heritage and the other, characterized by a different meter, was for some sort of performance type in which the poetic text was monologic or dialogic speech (Gunnell 1995, chps. 3–4). On the other hand, myths could also be communicated in some genres and not others. Within the kalevalaic poetry tradition, certain mythological narratives were associated with use as incantation *historiolae* (the narrative portion of an incantation) and not normally told as stories outside of those contexts, while others were used more widely and as entertainment (see also Tarkka 2013, pp. 67–71, 189–90). Myths conventionally told in kalevalaic epic might be partly or largely summarized for folklore collectors but were not told as a prose narrative tradition (see e.g., Frog 2010a, pp. 59–102; however, see also (Rausmaa 1964)); other myths are not found in verse (e.g., Frog 2011). The handling and representation of mythology could vary by genre; for example, mythological locations are more strictly differentiated in kalevalaic epic yet some become interchangeable in incantations (Siikala [1992] 2002, p. 162). Mythology gets interfaced with practices. Where performance genres were characteristic of different types of ritual specialists, the mythology built into their respective genres could be very different, as between the mythology of kalevalaic epic and incantation in contrast to the mythology of Karelian laments (Stepanova 2014, esp. p. 199; 2012, pp. 265–81; Frog 2015, pp. 48–50). Although there may be emic genres of myth, myths are expressed and referred to across genres, with the potential for significant variation between practices and types of practitioners. Although there may be a genre of telling myths in a culture, myth does not in most cases seem to emerge as a coherent emic genre (see also Herran 2017, p. 7).

Myths are mediated through different forms of expression. Although some forms of expression may be devoted to presenting and communicating myths, these do not account for myths in a society generally. Myth operates at a symbolic level of what is communicated linguistically or through another medium of expression. It is possible to argue for myth as a genre, but as a genre it must be considered specifically at that level of signs that can be mediated through language. Myth is thus a different type of category from what we normally call a folklore genre.

5. Myth and Poetics

From the outset, the modern valorization of myth has been connected to discussions of poetics, a connection that has shaped ways of thinking about myth in subtle ways. It may be foregrounded even today, especially in Indo-European studies, as reflected in titles like Calvert Watkins' *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Watkins 1995) or M.L. West's *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*

(West 2007). Foundations for the connection between myth and poetics were laid by Robert Lowth in his groundbreaking work *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum praelectiones* (“Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews”) (Lowth 1753). Lowth turned attention from the religious content of the Bible to the poetics of form and rhetoric. Observing that the Greeks considered poetry something sacred and inspired by supernatural power, Lowth developed a view of Biblical texts as the pure and natural religious expression of the Hebrew people, manifesting the pinnacle of aesthetic expression (see also Vico [1725] 1984, p. 71). The aesthetics realized through pure religious expression empowered these texts to affect the reader. Johann Gottfried von Herder advanced Lowth’s vision from the Hebrews to any *Volk*, and thus to the religion of any folk (e.g., von Herder 1985). Herder extended the aesthetic potential of verbal art to the powerful images and symbols of stories of gods and heroes. Myth’s elevation through Romanticism was not owing to affiliation with religion per se: myth was seen as the inspired product of a people with the potential to reciprocally inspire others, even a modern audience. Myths were not simply stories of strange beliefs; they were a cultural and aesthetic pinnacle. In other words, just as the elevation of poetry among other varieties of language is based on its aesthetic quality, something to be enjoyed, myths were elevated among other varieties of stories, history, or philosophical writings by the corresponding quality of symbolic expression.

Evaluations that are ultimately aesthetic thus formed the foundation of modern discussions of myth. Ideas about myth as a category have built on these aesthetic evaluations, which continue to be reflected in definitions today, such as Michael Witzel’s recent description: “*Surpassing the use of language in commonplace daily interactions*, myths and whole mythologies are systems of symbols” (Witzel 2012, p. 7, emphasis added). Doty proposes that the emphasis on myth as narrative or story has arisen “as a way to stress the humanistic values of imaginative storytelling, in contrast to bloodless scientific abstraction and arithmeticizing” (Doty 2000, p. 49). Like the criterion story, aesthetic evaluation is a factor in the “us” versus “other” dimension of myth. The aesthetics of symbolic representations of myth are emotive and thus further contrast with the objective rationality of science. In fact, aesthetic evaluation presupposes that myth is symbolic, obfuscating what it represents and requiring interpretation. We may accept that fundamental truths of the human condition can be encoded in the symbols of myth, more or less in line with Herder’s spiritual emphasis in valorizing myth’s symbolic aesthetic. When it comes to the empirical world outside of us, however, modern knowledge ideology considers non-literal representation inaccurate and misleading. Consequently, myth is not viable as a medium for such knowledge and representations of such knowledge are exempted from aesthetic evaluation. Convictions of their “truth” have left scientifically produced models of the Big Bang or Evolution beyond the scope of aesthetic evaluation no less than Judeo-Christian models of the creation of the world and establishment of social order, valorized through history for their content of true knowledge rather than their symbolism. Of course, any of these *can be* aesthetically assessed—God moving over the primal waters and the Big Bang are both powerful motifs—but such assessment is incidental to their evaluation as “truth.” Aesthetic assessment simultaneously promotes treating myth as a type of story and limits the applicability of the concept to traditions that we consider to lack literal truth. It is necessary to be critically aware of this factor in the history of discussion in order to break free from its constraints on our thinking.

6. Myths as Models

Whereas conceiving myth as a story is a question of form, the other side of the discussion concerns myths as representations. Modern discourse rapidly evolved the perspective that stories of non-Christian religions were based on realities of nature, history, or society (see Feldman and Richardson 1972). Some saw myths as originating from error or oral culture: “The fact which forms the foundation of it [i.e., a myth], was a natural one; tradition transformed it into the miraculous” (Tholuck 1836, p. 161). Others saw imagination and invention in the background, inventing stories to account for anything that otherwise lacked clear explanation (Taylor [1871] 1920, vol. I, p. 392). Max Müller championed natural phenomena and particularly the sun as being behind a number

of myths (Müller [1856] 1990). Émile Durkheim, participating in the turn to the 20th-century approach, saw myths as ultimate reflections of society: religion's "primary object is not to give men a representation of the physical world [...] individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it" (Durkheim [1912] 1915, p. 225). Whatever the frame of interpretation, myths have been consistently seen as modeling or otherwise representing or accounting for some sort of reality, although they may become dislocated from that social function, and, as Roger Bastide reminds us, are fully dislocated from it in scientific discussion (Bastide [1935] 2003, p. 57).

This aspect of myth has evolved rich discussions on the relationship between myth and thought, especially in relation to magic and ritual, but also in relation to society more generally. Branisław Malinowski, for example, proposed that "Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived" (Malinowski [1926] 1948, p. 100). Psychological approaches are an offshoot of these discussions of myth as modeling system. They extend views of modeling from the external world to reflections of the human condition (see also Segal 2013).¹² Carl G. Jung's claims that "Myths are original revelations of the pre-conscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings" (Jung [1945] 1998, p. 349) and that they "are first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul" (Jung [1959] 1969, p. 6) in fact echo Herder's emphasis, viewed through a lens of psychology rather than spirit, while his assertion that "The primitive mentality does not *invent* myths, it *experiences* them" (Jung [1945] 1998, p. 349) echoes Malinowski. Claude Lévi-Strauss' approach to myth as the mediation between opposites is similarly an outgrowth of these diverse discussions, albeit at a highly abstract level that saw mythological thinking as motivating some sort of mediation when opposed pairs were perceived (Lévi-Strauss 1955, pp. 440–43). Ernst Cassirer described myth succinctly "as a specific *function*—necessary in its place—of man's way of knowing the world" (Cassirer [1923–1929] 1955–1957, vol. II, p. 3, original emphasis), a sentiment subsequently described by Maurice Leenhardt as "*un mode de connaissance affective parallèle à notre mode de connaissance objective*" ("an affective mode of knowing parallel to our objective mode of knowing") (Leenhardt [1947] 1971, p. 306).

Story and modeling, as form and function, have been treated as complementary aspects of myth. Which of these receives emphasis has been in part structured by the history of discussion in a discipline and in part by the material addressed. Malinowski stands out by developing his views from within the culture he studies with anthropological interest rather than theorizing from an armchair about texts in printed books, yet his emphasis on mythology as a modeling system is not solely a consequence of that different situation. He was also considering mythology in part of the world where the expectations based on Indo-European models of mythology and religion were not strongly supported. Leenhardt faced a similar issue: he did not observe Melanesians being aware of myths in the sense customarily understood in Europe. These scholars still speak of myths, but the concept had to flex in relation to what was observed, continuing to be adapted as it has been handled in relation to traditions ranging from Australian Aboriginal dreamtime to American political discourse under Donald Trump.

With the reflexivity that accompanied postmodernism in the second half of the 20th century, academic discussions of myths as models for thinking underwent a radical innovation. Myths began to be reconceived in terms of signs or symbols rather than stories. The pivotal work in this discussion in the West was Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, a small volume in which were collected a number of short essays illustrating modern myths and a long theoretical discussion from the perspective of semiotics on what myth is and how it operates (Barthes [1957] 1972). Barthes was concerned with mythology in contemporary Western culture rather than with stories of ancient or foreign religions and he theorized mythology from that perspective. His use of myth corresponds to colloquial uses of

¹² It is worth observing that some psychological studies involve little source criticism, lift the myth from its historical cultural contexts, and interpret it primarily as a tool to reflect on aspects of psychology or sociology in the interpreter's own society, making its relevance to the study of the particular myth or of mythology more generally doubtful.

the word to refer to counterfactual things people in our own cultures accept as how the world is and works. This approach helped make it possible to move past the obstacles of thinking about myths in our own cultures and made the concept of myth clearly relevant to them. Psychological approaches were already well established, but developed by using mythic symbols from other cultures to discuss our own, and Christian religion could also be viewed through such frames. Contemporary to Barthes, Eliade extended discussions of myths from other cultures to ours, identifying mythic patterns that were being reused and touching on a variety of what he considered “modern mythologies,” although his uses of mythology and religion sometimes simply seem like metaphorical or analogical frames of reference in these discussions (Eliade [1957] 1975; Eliade [1963] 1968). What set Barthes’ contribution apart was that he theorized about what myths are and how they work in such an environment.

Not long thereafter, Soviet semiotics seems to have undergone a boom of interest in re-evaluating mythology as a system of signs (for a survey in English, see (Hoppál [1977] 2010)). D.M. Segal highlighted mythology’s function as a modeling system early in this trend: “The semiotic investigation of mythology considers myths such a system of behavior in groups of people as models the outside world or its details in the mind of the individuals forming the community in question” (Segal 1962, p. 92; translation (Hoppál [1977] 2010, p. 6)). Contemporary Soviet mythology was exempt from critical discussion. Semiotic analysis was applied to cultures that were other, from Proto-Slavic to Ket, a people with a Siberian language not related to any others known (Hoppál [1977] 2010), and also to pre-Soviet history, such as the conception that Peter the Great was the Antichrist (Lotman and Uspenskii [1973] 1976). Rather than myths being distinguished by formal characteristics such as being a story, myth became characterized as a relationship between signs and the world. This relationship can be described in terms of a quality of signification, affecting how we perceive the relationship between the sign and reality. Barthes described this as *naturalization*, when something that is actually a product of culture is perceived as nature or part of the natural order of the world (Barthes [1957] 1972, p. 128). The signs are symbolic in terms of meanings, evaluations, and associations, but they function iconically: they are what they represent (see also (Hoppál 2000, p. 26); on different types of signification generally, see (Sebeok 1992)). Basically, we recognize a scenario like a battle between good and evil as a sort of schema in which the hero and his adversary are distinguished and recognized through various cues. However, as soon as we recognize the scenario and thus recognize it as a sign, we perceive it *as* a battle between good and evil, flooding the scenario with significance, whether it is the struggle between Harry Potter and Voldemort or between a pure and shining clothes-washing detergent and a dark, nasty stain of advertising animation.

Semiotic approaches evolved with a theoretical emphasis on the relations between myth and language, not because myth was seen as fundamentally linguistic but because language is the primary system of signs that we use to communicate other signs. This concern was not new (e.g., Vico [1725] 1984; Müller 1873; Cassirer [1923–1929] 1955–1957; Cassirer 1925). However, the turn toward looking at myth as a quality of signification entailed a shift from earlier attention to the relationship between words and things to what was happening at the level of conceptual categories to which words refer. The new line of thinking led discussions to explore the boundaries of what qualifies as myth. For example, Yuri M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspenskij argue that the quality of myth exists on a spectrum and some level of myth is involved in every sign. For example, even the word *horse* comes with a package of culturally constructed understandings, evaluations, and associations as part of the natural order of horses in the (i.e., our) world (Lotman and Uspenskii [1973] 1976). Just seeing something and recognizing it as a “horse” is apprehending what we see as an iconic sign, recognizing it as a “horse” with the identity that carries. This look at the extreme periphery of mythological thinking may seem absurdly mundane when thinking about our own cultural categories and associated expectations. On the other hand, the approach can be quite valuable in mythic ethnography—i.e., the study, with a focus on the supernatural, of peoples and types of agents as perceived by a culture or group. Where we see a predatory cat defined in biological terms, the same cat can be perceived through Amerindian mythology as an agent whose appearance is “a mere envelope (a ‘clothing’) which conceals an internal

human form” (de Castro 1998, p. 471); where we see a bird, Karelians could see a visitation by a deceased relative or messenger from the otherworld (Stepanova 2011, p. 139). Actually, Lotman and Uspenskij’s approach was anticipated a century earlier in Max Müller’s claim that “Mythology is inevitable [...] it is an inherent necessity of language [...] which can never disappear till language becomes altogether commensurate with thought, which it never will” (Müller 1873, pp. 353–54).

When the semiotic approach can potentially be extended to any signs, it can seem so broad and inclusive as to dissolve its usefulness. However, the example of *horse* illustrates the periphery of the theoretical approach and thereby underscores that myth is a quality of signification—a level at which we engage with a sign. Horse is not claimed to be a mythic category, as might be claimed for troll or angel. Nor is the concept restricted to static, nominal categories; it remains applicable for things involving change with narrative potential, like the idea that Thor strikes trolls. The most important lesson to be taken from semiotic approaches is that myth operates in relation to categories. Whether trolls, thunder striking devils, or the battle of good and evil, an expression or part thereof is identified with a category, and recognizing the category activates it as an identity at the level of mythological thinking: a horse is a horse; a wrestling match is a battle between forces of good and evil. In each case, the myth is not the instantiation, but the categorical identity that, once recognized, *becomes* the identity of what is perceived.

Semiotic approaches are oriented not to analyzing narrative texts but to conceiving the world and the interpretive perception of experiences. These approaches are well suited to investigations of beliefs linked to discourse and practices, including the study of mythology in our own cultures. They are generally applicable in studies concerned with aspects of mythology beyond stories, especially in societies or traditions where mythology does not center on narratives about specific events in mythic time. On the other hand, when myth is defined in this broad, inclusive way, it may be less effective for addressing stories about gods, each with a unique identity. Semiotic approaches are not normally equipped to differentiate between the myth, the particular story about Thor fishing for the World Serpent and event-type categories like that Thor strikes trolls or that thunder comes from God’s wagon. I have elsewhere proposed a solution to this problem by distinguishing symbols with a unique identity comparable to proper nouns as *centralized symbols*, as opposed to *decentralized symbols*, which can each be multiply instantiated like common nouns (Frog 2014a, §3). The advantage of an extended approach to myth is that myths as identity-bearing stories (i.e., as centralized symbols) become viewed as elements in a much broader matrix of emotionally invested elements of mythology (decentralized symbols) that they relate to in a variety of ways (Frog 2015). Disadvantages are not at the level of theory, but at the level of terminology. It may be more practical for a text-oriented study to use a story-based definition of myth, but narrowing the definition of the term does not exclude a researcher from drawing insight from approaches through semiotics, even if addressed through different vocabulary.

7. Mythic Discourse

As “discourse” became both a catchword and a new frame for looking at different phenomena, the term began to be used in connection with mythology. *Mythic discourse* refers to the uses, communication and manipulation of mythology by people in society, focusing on situated practice rather than focusing on form (story) or meaning (quality of signification). The turn to mythic discourse belongs to a paradigm shift that moved across disciplines in the wake of postmodernism. This turn involved a shift in emphasis from addressing language, texts, and culture in abstract, ideal terms aloof from societies, to their contexts and meanings. In linguistics, the dominance of Saussurian *langue*, or language as a hegemonic and abstract system, gave way to study of *parole*, or speech as variations of language in situations of use. In manuscript philology, the focus had been on reverse-engineering the copying and recopying of a particular text from the different preserved versions back to a reconstructed ideal, original form. The turn brought into focus the agency of people and meaningfulness of texts when each version was copied or read, the significance of variations within texts and of arrangements of texts in different manuscripts. This turn was particularly pronounced in folklore studies, where

the discipline was younger and had a fairly narrow, prescriptive emphasis on comparative study with the aim of reverse-engineering the spread of folklore and ultimately reconstructing the *Urform* of the story, proverb, or whatever was being investigated. The shift in research was nothing less than revolutionary, switching emphasis from diachronic continuities to synchronic variation, from formal elements in abstracted systems to situated meanings produced by agents in society (Frog 2013a, pp. 19–22). This was the folklore equivalent of the change in focus in linguistics from *langue* to *parole*, which Ferdinand de Saussure had considered so different from one another that he believed they would have to be addressed by different disciplines (de Saussure [1916] 1967, pp. 36–39). At the time, scholars did not recognize that the *langue* and *parole* of folklore are different things studied through the same material. Instead, they saw the difference in terms of the correct way to study folklore. The impact of this on the study of mythology was to bring situated use into focus. In folklore studies, the turn was accompanied by distancing from treatments of myths as stories or texts outside of social contexts and distancing from investigations into the history of myths prior to their documentation.

The shift to mythic discourse started off as an impact of the paradigm shift on research. Mythic discourse only gradually took shape as an approach to mythology. The history of the term “mythic(al) discourse” is not easy to trace because it seems to have emerged independently in several disciplines in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of these uses were simply as a descriptive phrase for a “discourse” that in one way or another was “of or relating to myth(ology).” There were relatively early uses of the term for a concept with analytical merit, as in John R. Carnes’ distinction of mythic discourse from scientific discourse and descriptive discourse (Carnes 1967, p. 125). However, the expression seems only to have been getting a foothold as a term in the 1980s and began to spread mainly around 1990. Approaching mythology through discourse aligned with the increased attention to meanings, performance and viewing mythology in terms of systems of symbols.¹³ It was quickly adapted into studies of mythology and religion (e.g., Urban 1991; Siikala [1992] 2002) and has been more generally explored as a tool for approaching how people interact with emotionally invested symbols (e.g., Goodman 1993). Perhaps owing to the emergence of mythic discourse as a descriptive label rather than an analytical term, it has been accepted as a framework for research without being formalized by a methodology (although see e.g., (Schjødtt 2013; Frog 2015)). Today, mythic discourse continues to be used without explicit definition.

Most uses of mythology in society do not take the form of people telling stories, but of applying and manipulating knowledge of mythology, referring to it, doing things with it. As a consequence, discussions of mythic discourse often concentrate on elements smaller in scope than a story or narrative plot. When multiple versions of a story are brought under scrutiny, analysis will normally concern variations between them and how those variations relate to situated meaning production (e.g., Tarkka 2013). When an analysis takes a diachronic emphasis, it may take a number of forms. This may be the construction of mythology and its meaningfulness through discourse (e.g., O’Leary and McFarland 1989) and considering changes in its significance over time in that light (e.g., Frog 2014a). Historical stratification can be brought into focus, addressing formal continuities of symbols from different periods and how this relates to their continued use, relevance and evolving meanings in connection with social practices (Siikala [1992] 2002). Established local and regional variations in mythology can be examined as potentially reflecting contacts, processes or changes in society to make them meaningful and interesting when they became established (e.g., Frog 2012). Even when complex stories are under discussion, the concentration tends to be on elements smaller in scope than a whole plot. The units concerned generally correspond to units treated in semiotic approaches.

Mythic discourse stands between approaches that focus on myths as stories and those that focus on the mythic quality of signs. These three types of approaches overlap and mix in different ways, but

¹³ Even scholars who define myths in terms of stories seem increasingly to view mythology in terms of symbols (e.g., Witzel 2012, p. 17).

it is useful to oversimplify them in order to gain perspective on how they relate to one another. At least historically, approaches to myths as stories have been concerned with myths in terms of their form and as wholes imagined in ideal terms of an organized series of narrative or symbolic elements. Semiotic approaches tend to bring smaller and more abstract elements of mythology into focus with concern for meanings and how myths make things meaningful. Both of these can be described as centered on the *langue* of mythology, or mythology as an ideal and abstract system. In contrast, mythic discourse is centered on the *parole* of mythology, its situated uses, variation, and pragmatics of meaning. The three are complementary rather than competing, focused on different aspects of mythology and viewing mythology from different angles. No one approach is “right” and others “wrong”; each is better suited to certain source materials and investigations. Some scholars may prefer to maintain a consistent approach for instance as part of their research profile, but there is nothing wrong with shifting your approach to whatever is best suited to a certain investigation. Emphasis on stories or semiotics creates concerns about how to define myth, whereas research on mythic discourse tends to simply qualify elements as mythic, including stories. Rather than advancing a definition to distinguish myths from other types of mythic signs, myth tends to remain undefined in this research and the term myth can be quite marginal. The following sections will discuss theoretical and methodological topics relevant (though not necessarily exclusive) to mythic discourse.

7.1. Toward a Typology of Mythic Symbols

Mythic symbols, whether simple images or complex stories, are socially circulating signs (e.g., [Urban 1991](#)). There has been a tendency to treat these signs as vague and amorphous, which has been nurtured by the diversity of ways in which terms like motif, theme, and so forth have been used. This issue has been prominent in folklore research, where such units have probably been identified and traced across corpora more than in any other discipline. Like genre, however, the units were most often practical tools for research without theoretical foundation, such as Stith Thompson’s description of a motif: “Certain items in narrative keep on being used by story-tellers; they are the stuff out of which tales are made. It makes no difference exactly what they are like; if they are actually useful in the construction of tales, they are considered to be motifs” ([Thompson 1955](#), p. 7). Thompson’s motif index became a cornerstone reference work across the middle of the twentieth century, but, as Heda Jason points out, “What is listed there as a ‘motif’ are content elements on various levels: large units, such as whole episodes and one-episodic tales, side by side with such small units as a single character, requisite and deed, or a quality of these” ([Jason 2000](#), p. 22). When these categories were developed, most folklorists were not concerned about formally defining the units (although see also ([Propp \[1928\] 1968](#))). The emphasis was on wide-ranging comparisons and identifying relevant things to compare rather than culture-specific meanings: Thompson’s motif, like the comparable tale-type, met the dominant interests and needs of the time, at least for a while.

When mythic symbols are brought into focus, we become specifically concerned with meaning-bearing units. Symbols can change through transmission and interpretation over time, but within any given context they are formally distinguishable—indeed they must be, or they could not be recognized. However, they are not of uniform type and can be structurally distinguished. Above, symbols like Thor or his fishing adventure were distinguished as centralized in the sense that their identity is unique, like a proper noun: there are never two Thors; he does not have two fishing adventures. Centralized symbols were contrasted with decentralized symbols that form a categorical identity, an identity-type like troll of which there are many, and like “Thor strikes [agent of chaos]” that may occur numerous times each year. There are also clear formal distinctions between types of symbolic units, some of which are comparable to categories developed for structural narrative analysis (see e.g., the review in ([Hoppál 2010](#))). Recognizing formal differences between types of symbols and rules for their combination becomes a tool for analysis. The approach outlined here represents a system I have been developing through application to a wide variety of material in different contexts (e.g., [Frog 2014a, 2014c, 2015, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b](#)).

A basic distinction is between symbols that are static, corresponding to nominal categories, like Thor and troll, as opposed to those that are dynamic. Minimal static units can be described as *mythic images*¹⁴ that form bundles of information. Thus, in a medieval Scandinavian context, identification as a troll carries information like big, supernaturally strong, ugly, stupid, etc., as well as social evaluations and behavioral expectations (see also Schulz 2004; Kuusela 2017). Supernatural strength is also a characteristic of Thor and other mythic images; it can be distinguished in analysis as a physical supernatural quality, but it is an integrated element of images that it qualifies rather than operating independently. Constituent elements of a mythic image can be approached as *symbolic partials* because they form parts of a coherent symbol. A mythic image can also be a symbolic partial of another image. For example, Thor's hammer Mjölnir is a distinct symbol in Old Norse mythology and miniature Thor's hammers were also worn or carried by people in the Viking Age (e.g., Simek 1996, pp. 219–20). Mjölnir was also an attribute that was an integrated part of the mythic image Thor: when Thor is recognized, he is assumed to have his hammer even if it is not mentioned, and in iconography Thor is reciprocally recognized through a hammer as his emblematic attribute.

Minimal symbolic units that are dynamic, involving change or putting two or more images in a relationship, can be described as *motifs* in a formalized sense. “Thor strikes [agent of chaos] with Mjölnir” is thus a motif with multiple manifestations, a decentralized symbol. This motif has centralized forms in cosmological encounters with specific giants like “Thor strikes Hrungnir with Mjölnir” (e.g., (Snorri Sturluson 1987, 1998); *Skáldskaparmál*, vol. I, chp. 17; Simek 1996, pp. 161–63). Evaluations and interpretations become built into the structural positions of a motif. The motif “Thor challenges [agent of chaos] to duel,” for example, entails and evaluative interpretation of any agent filling the variable slot. *Brennu-Njáls saga* includes a story of how Thor challenged Jesus to a duel but the latter was too cowardly to show up (Sveinsson 1952, chp. 102). At a glance, this story may seem to simply assert Jesus' inferiority to Thor. When the motif is recognized, Jesus becomes correlated with the role of giants and other agents of chaos that threaten the community or world order. The motif thus not only situates the images of gods and their associated religions in a relative hierarchy of power; it also situates Jesus, and by extension Christianity, in relation to society. Motifs can be fully decentralized like “[Good] battles [evil]” with its conventional subtypes like “[Good wrestler] battles [bad wrestler]” or “[Cleaning product] battles [unsanitary agent]” (see also Barthes [1957] 1972, pp. 13–23, 35–37). Although the images in a motif may vary, the slots of the motif may be characterized by symbolic partials that make it salient, such as red as the color of a bad wrestler or emblematic identification of a positive cleaning product with the color white, soap bubbles, shine, or the twinkle of reflecting light. The motif informs the identities of the images filling its slots. Where motifs are strongly linked to an image, they also become partials of that image, like “[hero] slays [monster]” becoming a partial “monster-slayer” as a hero-type; “[ghost] haunts [house]” yielding “haunted house” as an image type. A third type of minimal symbolic unit is *diagrammatic*, a static relation like father–son, mother–daughter, hero–monster, good–evil, etc. Diagrammatic symbols not only carry information about the relationship, but also inform the images that fill their slots in the same manner as a motif.

Minimal units of images and motifs can be organized into more complex units that take on a distinct symbolic identity in the same way that a formulaic phrase can be made up of several words that together have a more particular meaning. More complex units form arrangements in a structural hierarchy. I use the term *theme* to designate a conventionally associated system of images and motifs or equivalent sets of these that form a sequence. In Old Norse saga literature, the motif “[supernatural agent] communicates in dream” is the core of a predictable sequence. The dream encounter is most often, though not always, implicitly or explicitly motivated by “[something] disturbs/harms [supernatural being]” and the communication is then followed by “[dreamer] complies

¹⁴ Siikala discusses mythic images without formally distinguishing images from motifs, as is done here (Siikala [1992] 2002, pp. 47–49).

with [request/demand],” in which case “[dreamer] benefits”; or “[dreamer] ignores [request/demand]” and “[dreamer] suffers”. A variation of this theme occurs when the dream visitation is motivated by “[dreamer] summons [supernatural being],” in which case “[dreamer] benefits” may follow directly (e.g., being healed of affliction). I use the term *narrative pattern* for structural units above the level of a theme, within which themes may participate and repeat. For example, a hero’s journey may be organized with a series of obstacles that must be overcome as a series of themes. The same series may also be organized as repetition of the same theme with varying slots for the image or motif of the obstacle and connected motif whereby it is overcome, symbolically correlating the obstacles as somehow equivalent (Frog 2017b). Christian manipulation of the dream encounter theme produced a narrative pattern in which the conversion or activity of Christians disturbs a supernatural being who visits the dreamer repeatedly, and each time the requests or demands are ignored. Contrary to expectation in other contexts, the dreamer is unharmed, illustrating the superior power of Christianity over paganism ((Anonymous 1858–1878), *Borvalds þáttir viðförla*, chp. 3; (Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsen 1991), *Flóamanna saga*, chps. 20–21). Structurally, this narrative pattern operates on a different level from themes that it organizes into a complex sequence.

7.2. The Indexicality of Mythic Symbols

A significant part of mythic discourse is built on referential uses of mythology. The referentiality of mythic signs can be approached through *indexicality*, the degree to which a sign “indexes” something or points to it in some way. The classic example is that smoke indexes fire—the experience-based and discourse-based association leads us to think about fire when we see smoke. In our own societies, referential uses of myth are recognized intuitively, through our own innate cultural competence. Distinguishing and analyzing such references in other cultures can be more challenging, especially when the traditions in question are historically remote and the sources limited.

In our cultures today, for example, crucifixion is a powerful symbol, a symbol that we recognize or respond to as emotionally charged. Even if we do not acknowledge the crucifixion as an event that established the current world order (not to mention our calendar), the symbol remains a powerful resource for meanings. Almost any time crucifixion is met in literature, drama, cinema, or the visual arts, it is interpreted in relation to the crucifixion of Jesus. It may be a direct representation of that mythic event or explicitly refer to Jesus on the cross, but the association is so strong that any representation of crucifixion inevitably indexes the central symbolic event of Christianity—it points to the mythic event and, for those of us with basic cultural competence, activates that event as a frame of interpretation. The crucifixion of Jesus is a centralized symbol, an event with a unique identity. The referential relation between the mythic event and other uses of crucifixion can be viewed as hierarchical: other uses produce a directional reference to Jesus’ crucifixion. Such directional reference can be contrasted with uses of decentralized symbols like the battle between good and evil or the thunder-god striking trolls and devils. If we watch a series of wrestling matches, we can gradually internalize the symbolic paradigm of the battle between good and bad wrestlers: we become able to recognize the pattern without it activating any particular wrestling event. In this case, the paradigm’s indexicality is distributed more or less evenly across relevant wrestling matches, and the more abstract battle pattern is further distributed across wrestling, literature, advertising, political discourse, and so on. In contrast to the centralized symbol of Jesus’ crucifixion that is internalized as a centralized symbol through its multitude of representations, references to it, discussions of it, etc., the battle between good and evil is internalized as a decentralized event-type through multiple examples in different media and associated discourse.

In the case of crucifixion, directional reference has developed because, in our cultural milieu, crucifixion is not used independent of the mythic event: uses all represent the crucifixion of Jesus or refer to it in some way. As a consequence, we internalize the event-type as exclusive to the death of Jesus, so that when we recognize crucifixion as a meaningful sign, it always indexes the death of Jesus, always points the perceiver to the mythic event. The case is transparent because the symbolism

is culturally pervasive and the crucifix, with or without a representation of Jesus hanging from it, is the primary emblem of Christianity. There are other crucifixions in Christian mythology: Jesus was crucified with two other people, and the Apostle Peter was crucified later. Other crucifixions alongside Jesus nevertheless belong to that event, whereas Peter is said to have requested to be crucified upside-down so that his suffering would not correspond to his master's. Peter's crucifixion is thus not only directly linked to Jesus' but also asserts and affirms that Jesus' crucifixion was distinctive and important through differentiation. In its time, crucifixion was just a form of execution without religious overtones. Only where crucifixion lacked other social contexts did it begin to index Jesus' death specifically.

This type of indexical exclusivity is by no means restricted to mythic symbols. Most people today similarly recognize the countless variations of *To be or not to be* as references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or any number of phrases like *I'll be back*, *There can be only one*, and *Here's Johnny* as linked to a particular scene in a particular film even if they appear on a blog or in an episode of *The Simpsons*. However, such recognition is based on cultural competence, occurring unconsciously and intuitively. When approaching other cultures, researchers may develop what can be described as *artificial competence* in a tradition: they internalize it primarily or exclusively through a corpus and research discourses connected with that corpus rather than through exposure to and participation in the living practices. For example, Leea Virtanen points out that a researcher of kalevalaic poetry "can usually say without difficulty to which song particular lines belong" (Virtanen 1968, p. 55). Such ability derives from the internalization of relations between verses and particular poem-types through study of the corpus. Virtanen's statement was intended to highlight the strong link in this tradition between individual poems as texts and the formulaic verses, couplets and groups of verses of which they are comprised (see also Frog 2016b). This does not mean that the particular verse would never be found in another context. The claim oversimplifies variation in the tradition and marginalizes the fact that some verses are linked to meanings or functions rather than single poems *per se* (Tarkka 2013, p. 90). Nevertheless, when a verse associated with one poem appears in a different context, it indexes its conventional use, which becomes activated as a frame of reference, thereby making it possible to, for instance, introduce cosmological connotations into a secular poem (Tarkka 2017). Artificial competence most often leads such relationships to be recognized intuitively, but researcher intuition can be validated by empirical evidence.

The potential indexicality a formula or text sequence can be statistically assessed within a corpus. The kalevalaic corpus is huge, with around 150,000 poems and fragments. Close to 90,000 are digitized, which makes it easy to review the contexts in which a particular phrase or sequence of text appears. Probable indexicality can be statistically assessed on a scale from zero to one by reviewing all of the examples in a corpus and dividing the number associated with a particular use, association or significance by the total number. If 99 of 100 examples are used in the same context or function and one is not, this gives an indexicality of 0.99 and suggests that people would intuitively perceive a relationship between the one exceptional use and the conventional context. This exercise does not make indexicality a certainty. It is in part dependent on the representativeness of the data. Reviewing the data may lead to new insights, such as a formula being conventionally linked to perhaps two or three contexts rather than only one. If the link to particular contexts varies on a regional basis, the formula could index different mythic events in those regions. If the different contexts are observed in a single region, the indexicality of the formula could be to a meaning or type of situation rather than to a particular poem (Tarkka 2017). Where the calculated indexicality suggests some sort of convention but seems relatively low, such as 0.3, it may come to light that the formula co-occurs with other features in those contexts, and when these are considered as a collective system, the indexicality becomes quite high. Even if the assessment of indexicality requires interpretation and may demand qualitative review of individual examples, it can provide a tool to assess probabilities in a particular corpus.

Assessing the indexicality of units of language is relatively straightforward because the limits of linguistic signs are unambiguous. Images and motifs can also be analyzed in this way, but these are

signs mediated by language or some other system of representation. A complex image like the world tree or the god Thor are not exhaustively described in every instance: it may be enough that the image is recognizable, leaving many of its features implicit. The researcher is thus faced with the challenge of trying to distinguish the socially circulating signs underlying different representations, and then correlating examples and variations, often with concentration on emblematic features. For example, a distinctive description of a serpent is found in the medieval Icelandic *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* ((Jónsson and Vilhjálmsson 1943–1944), *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, chp. 2): it has grown so large that it encircles a princess' bower, and this serpent must be overcome by the hero. The image of this serpent mirrors the mythological World Serpent that grew so large as to encircle the earth, and the World Serpent is correspondingly to be confronted by the god Thor. Anyone intimately familiar with the Old Norse corpus will immediately recognize the parallel, but without a methodological basis such interpretations are easily deconstructed as ambiguous in light of alternative explanations. The image of the encircling serpent, known as the *ouroboros*, is widely known (Oehrl 2013), but in Scandinavian textual material it is particularly associated with the World Serpent in evidence ranging from stories about Thor to poetic expressions for the serpent like *lykkja stoðar* ("loop of the earth"), *belti folder* ("belt of the earth") or *men lynga* ("necklace of heathers") (Simek 1996, p. 215). This image is not found in all versions of *Ragnars saga* (McTurk 1991), and a quick indexicality assessment suggests both that the image of the encircling serpent indexes the World Serpent and also that the image was *not* emblematic of the dragon slain by Ragnarr: directional reference is highly probable when it occurs. In other cases, a situation with limited sources may be more ambiguous, but, as a rule of thumb, cosmological events operate as models and precedence for events in the world rather than vice versa (Cassirer [1923–1929] 1955–1957, vol. II, p. 5). Thus, when we find a saga description of a hero performing a strength feat with the power of his rowing in a saga comparable to a feat performed by Thor on his popular fishing adventure, directional reference warrants consideration, even if the question cannot be resolved. Parallels of this type are also cumulative, and can reach a critical mass of activating a reference, for example where the rowing feat co-occurs with parallels to other feats of strength by Thor on the same adventure (Ahola 2014, p. 313; see also (Frog 2011, pp. 82, 88–91; Frog 2018a)). However, in such cases, reference will not naturally be reversed: a local hero rowing in connection with a mundane task will not be the referent of Thor's rowing on a cosmological adventure. Whatever the background of the cosmological event tradition, once established, it will become a referent for other equivalent events or at least prominently inform the significance of a more widespread image or motif.

7.3. Myth, Ritual, Taboo, and Expectations of Experience

Mythic discourse offers a valuable bridge between myth, ritual and taboo. It brings into focus units of mythology less complex than whole stories and elements like images and motifs that may manifest multiple events rather than having a unique identity. The different structural units outlined above are easily illustrated through narrative, but they are also relevant to ritual and the interpretation of experience. For example, if someone were to experience a dream in which a supernatural being makes a demand, that person would suddenly find the mythic theme being actualized as experience with its potential positive or negative outcomes for the dreamer. Siikala highlights that "the most crucial difference" between mythological stories and incantations or ritual poetry is the significance by the material and their use: in narrative, they "conjure up a picture of the world and its origins" as a shared medium for understanding and reflection, while in ritual contexts the same or complementary "knowledge acts as a tool in the hands of the" performance specialist ((Siikala [1992] 2002, p. 158), on kalevalaic poetry and the specialist known as a *tietäjä*). These processes not only account for differences in significance but also variation in mythology between genres, because of how genres become bound up with particular practices, users, and situations of use (Frog 2015). Ritual can also become a mode for the direct experience of relevant mythic symbols (Frog 2017c), while taboo can be considered based on a different (potential) relationship between mythic symbols and experience.

A mythic motif that has potential to be actualized can be described as *immanent*, whether it is a motif connected with the theme of dream visitation or a taboo violation with the consequence of being struck by lightning. Taboos that structure behaviors to avoid supernatural repercussions can be viewed in terms of immanent motifs, such as the thunder-god striking agents of chaos. In some cases, the taboo is structured as a chain of motifs forming an immanent theme. In Estonia, for example, windows and doors were not to be left open when it thundered because the motif “[agent of chaos] flees thunder” could lead to “fleeing [agent of chaos] enters house through open window/door.” The immanent motif “thunder strikes [agent of chaos]” could consequently occur, blasting through the house and likely setting it on fire. Rather than a single motif, the taboo is motivated by a theme, an immanent event sequence that could also be considered retrospectively to understand why a house was struck by lightning. Such taboos end up in dialogue with legends that present examples of people’s experiences of close calls or repercussions of taboo violations (Valk 2012).

Ritual performance orchestrates mythic motifs, themes, and narrative patterns, from expelling an agent of illness to ensuring the journey of a deceased individual to the otherworld and successful integration into the community of the ancestors (Frog 2017c; see also (Frog 2010b; Stepanova 2011, 2014)). For example, healing rituals can be organized on the narrative pattern of the thunder-god expelling a society-threatening agent of chaos: the healing specialist acts in the slot of the god as a representative of his power placing the illness agent in the opposing role of the confrontation (Siikala [1992] 2002, p. 101; Frog 2013b, pp. 66–67). The paradigm of such a battle is exemplified through stories of the god, but healing rituals are conventionally structured in distinct ways so that their symbolic significance is not perceived solely through reference to the god’s feats any more than Christian martyrdom of saints is perceived solely in relation to the martyrdom of Jesus. Shamanic rituals orchestrating journeys to remote otherworld locations with a successful return similarly manipulate mythological symbols on a cosmological level verbally, visually and through embodied enactment (Eliade [1964] 2004; Frog 2017c). Manifesting mythic images, motifs, themes, or even whole plots in a ritual context can be viewed as a form of mythic discourse, whether it is the ritual enactment or narration of an event that took place in mythic time or the reproduction of a mythic event-type.

There are long-standing discussions about the relationship of myth and ritual (Segal 1998), but, more generally, approaches to myths as stories frequently discuss the story on the one hand and treat ritual, legend, and taboo as separate from it, marginalizing the latter or leaving them aside entirely. From the perspective of mythic discourse, the same traditions and specific cases can emerge as conventional or unique manifestations of mythology in society. The capacity to consider how elements of different scope and complexity are used in these contexts is also significant. *Historiolae*, i.e., stories told as part of an incantation, have presented challenges for story-based approaches to myth, where the question has got viewed in binary terms of either being or not being story-myths. The Finno-Karelian corpus of mythological epic and incantation reveals that a *historiola* may correspond to a mythological epic and then abruptly diverge, while David Frankfurter has highlighted that mythic elements in *historiolae* may be in kaleidoscopic transformation in a tradition with the ability to link to, but also remain independent of, otherwise established myths as stories (Frankfurter 1995). On the other hand, legends of the thunder-god overcoming agents of chaos may go beyond paralleling cosmological events: a cosmological event may be presented as the basis for the god’s hostility toward these agents (Balys 1939, pp. 34–36). Alternately, the story of a cosmological event can account for the sacredness of a ritual site in the landscape or be transformed into a legend as an event witnessed and reported in the local environment (Frog 2018b). Considering such cases as mythic discourse avoids both the question of whether these should be classed myths in their own right and also the inclination to discuss them in terms of complex plots where only a portion of a story is customarily used.

7.4. Exclusive, Internally Homogeneous Mythologies versus a Symbolic Matrix

Mythologies have customarily been viewed as exclusive systems associated with a particular culture or religion. This view affects how mythologies are construed and structures the selection

of materials for an analysis. The contrasts between Christian and non-Christian traditions has been particularly pronounced, often generalizing non-Christian (“pagan,” “heathen,” etc.) as a unified and homogeneous category. Where features or practices of vernacular religion persist in an officially Christianized environment, this gets referred to as syncretism, which treats the features of different religions as belonging to separate spheres, although they may exist in tandem. Such a perspective devalues and marginalizes the potentially synthetic view of mythology as perceived by people in the society. Attending to mythic discourse shifts emphasis from one mythology or the other to the perspectives and activities of people in society. Homogeneity of non-Christian mythology gives way to variation by dialects alongside the potential for local communities to maintain distinct forms of religion. These distinct forms of religion may include partly or largely vernacularized Christianity—i.e., the Christianity of people and society that are Christian in their own eyes even if they would not be from the perspective of the Church (Lotman 1990, p. 130).

The vernacularization of medieval Christianity in Finland and Karelia resulted in a rich infusion of motifs and narrative patterns especially into historioids of ritual poetry (Siikala [1992] 2002; Frog 2013b). Calling the Christian and non-Christian elements of mythology syncretism or some sort of hybrid treats the traditions as derivative and secondary to two ideal mythologies. Scholars in the 19th and part of the 20th century were very concerned about disentangling these to get at the authentic vernacular mythology. However, Finno-Karelian mythology operated like this for at least 500 years and perhaps much longer before being documented in any detail (Frog 2015, pp. 47–48; Ahola et al. 2018, pp. 278–83). By the same token, the form of mythology that assimilated Christianity can be considered a Finnic creolization of Germanic religion (Frog 2018a). The Finnic religion of that creolization was itself a hybrid of Proto-Finnic and Proto-Baltic mythology, and, before that, the Proto-Finnic religion had been hybridized with an Indo-Iranian mythology (Siikala [1992] 2002; Frog 2012, 2017a; Kuusi 1963). In each era of its history, the mythology can be viewed as derivative and secondary to two more ideal, purer traditions.

When mythology is not viewed as having independent, objective existence in society and is instead situated in practices, it becomes centered in those practices and can vary between them. The fragmented elements of Finno-Karelian cosmogony were discussed above, but research has also shown that mythology may vary between practices within a society. For example, the mythology of the specialist user of kalevalaic incantations was quite different from that of the ritual lamenter. Moreover, the traditions of each specialist assimilated different elements from Christian traditions, so they were not even uniform at that level. Variation in mythology by specialist is an outcome of the relevant practices being connected to different specialist roles (linked to different genders) whose traditions are communicated through distinct conduits whereby practices and beliefs are transmitted (Stepanova 2012, pp. 265–81; Frog 2015, pp. 48–50). This does not mean that the traditions of different specialists were isolated from one another any more than that forms of practitioners of Christian rituals would remain oblivious to non-Christian rituals and vice versa. It simply means that mythology was centered in practices and was not necessarily consistent between them. This observation is of no surprise when we consider Christian and vernacular practices within a local society. We do not expect variation between vernacular practices within a society because we tend to imagine vernacular practices as uniform and unified in the mirror of Christianity.

Approached through mythic discourse, mythology in a cultural environment does not appear homogenous. I have described mythology in such an environment in terms of a *symbolic matrix*. Mythic symbols can be conceived as forming a matrix of networks. Perspectives on the symbols and groups of symbols current in a society may be linked with particular practices and specialists as opposed to others. Individuals use and manipulate or censor and ignore these symbols as they assert and negotiate different perspectives. When mythologies are treated in ideal terms of opposed religions, it is easy to overlook the fact that Thor is acknowledged as a supernatural agent active in the world by medieval Christian writers, as in an anecdote stressing that Christians should not take any aid that Thor might provide ((Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935), *Eiríks saga rauða*, chp. 8). Such cases are examples of mythic

discourse in which a representative of one religion manipulates symbols iconic of a competing religion in order to impact interpretations and social perception. Alternately, we are told that one of the settlers of Iceland “believed in Christ but called on Thor in seafaring and hard times” (([Benediktsson 1968](#)), *Landnámabók*, chps. S217–18), apparently without perceiving a contradiction. This statement only sounds odd if we take a hegemonic perspective based on Christian ideology that a mythology should be a closed system, pure and ideal. When mythology is viewed as a symbolic matrix, acknowledging both Christ and Thor as agents capable of supernatural support would simply suggest that the person saw agents and stories of Christianity as complementary to agents and stories of other gods he knew. This can be described as an expansion of the symbolic matrix without an ideology that contrasted religions as competing. Similarly, a story like how Thor challenged Jesus to a duel mentioned above slips between the cracks of approaches to mythologies as exclusive to their respective religions: it is a story that brings together gods from different religions and belongs to neither mythology. On the other hand, it has been considered characteristic of Uralic religions (i.e., Finnic, Khanty, Mari, Sámi, etc.) that the name of the sky-god’s adversary has been borrowed from the name of a positive god in another religion ([Ajkenvald et al. 1989](#), pp. 156–57). Forms of mythic discourse similar to the juxtaposition of Thor and Jesus are likely in the background of Uralic mythologies. The symbolic matrix expands when competing mythologies are active in common environments, where the same symbols may be viewed and interpreted from competing perspectives; and then the matrix contracts again as competing alternatives drop out, potentially leaving only traces of what has occurred ([Frog 2015](#); see also ([Frog 2017a, 2018a](#))), of which the fragments of kalevalaic cosmogony may be evidence.

Forms of mythic discourse are not exclusive to religions in the classic sense. The same processes can be observed from contexts ranging from the early Greek philosophers to modernization, where vernacular models for understanding the world were adapted to scientific ways of thinking. The tradition of Thunder pursuing and striking devils was quite prominent in Estonian culture, and Ülo Valk has explored how motifs based on that conception were transformed in the encounter between vernacular mythology and scientific models of 19th-century education ([Valk 2012](#)). Since the dog was recognized as an image of the devil (cf. [Valk 2001](#), pp. 112–13), it was only natural that thunder would strike dogs and that people thought it was best to stay away from dogs when it thundered. With modernization, thunder began to be reimagined according to scientific explanations. However, conceiving thunder as electricity did not mean it was safe to be around dogs when it thundered: thunder is attracted to dogs, “because dogs are magnetic. Black dogs are the most magnetic” ([Valk 2012](#), p. 55.). Taboos against leaving doors and windows open when it thunders to avoid the entry of fleeing devils were reinterpreted as attracting thunder because they caused movements in the air ([Valk 2012](#), pp. 52, 53, 58–59, 61). Emotional investment in paradigmatic conditions for lightning-strikes endured. Mythic agency is dissolved and reduced to vernacular physics while maintaining the same mythic patterns of taboos that provide explanations for lightning strikes, structure behavior, and offer resources for narration. The opposite can also be observed. In Finland, for example, meteorological explanations for thunder as deriving from meetings of hot and cold air did not conform to ideas of thunder as a product of agency, and the meeting of hot and cold was reimagined as a battle between personified beings (e.g., ([SKS KRA n.d.](#)), Paulaharju 23746. 1933). This type of process can be seen continuing through the present day where, for example, radiation can account for what in earlier forms of a tradition would be seen as supernatural ([Kivari 2016](#)).

7.5. Mythic Knowledge

The turn to mythic discourse and with the of attention to performers as agents has taken many forms, but it has produced a movement from focus on mythology as some sort of entity with an objective existence to mythology as knowledge and understandings of individuals in society. The concept of mythic knowledge has thereby become foregrounded. It has become particularly prominent in Finnish folklore research through Siikala’s influential work, which highlighted the relationship between mythology and ritual specialists (esp. [Siikala \[1992\] 2002](#)). Mythic knowledge

corresponds to internalized understandings of mythology that are transmitted through stories, practices and circulating discourse. Myths as stories are included in mythic knowledge, but the concept extends to knowledge of agents and forces of the unseen world, its topography, techniques, and technologies for engaging with those agents and forces, as well as for avoiding harm and so forth. Whereas mythic discourse contextualizes mythology in social practice, mythic knowledge conceives mythology in terms of socially circulating (and evolving) resources acquirable by individuals. From this perspective, mythology not only includes stories of a thunder-god's adventures in mythic time but also knowledge of that god as an agent in the current world. It may include knowledge of how to interact with that god through prayer or ritual and knowledge of how to avoid hostile actions of the god that structure taboos.

Approaching mythology in terms of knowledge is not new. Some scholars have opposed myth and knowledge as representing symbolic and scientific modes of thinking, respectively (e.g., [Cassirer \[1923–1929\] 1955–1957](#), vol. II). Nevertheless, the concept of mythic knowledge has deep roots that have grown from discussions of myths as models for thinking and understanding, such as Durkheim's view of religion as a projection of society ([Durkheim \[1912\] 1915](#)), Malinowski's social charter ([Malinowski \[1926\] 1948](#)), Leenhardt's mode of knowing ([Leenhardt \[1947\] 1971](#)), Lévi-Strauss's description of mythic symbols as *bonnes à penser* ("good(s) to think with") ([Lévi-Strauss 1962](#), p. 128), and so on (see also e.g., ([Doty 2000](#), pp. 55–56; [Carnes 1967](#), p. 125)). Like the phrase "mythic(al) discourse," the expression "mythic(al) knowledge" has been widely used to describe knowledge based on myth rather than science. The exploration of mythic knowledge as a more sophisticated concept can be considered a natural development from approaches to myths as models-for understanding to myths as knowledge-of. Yuri Berezkin's view of the transmission of myths in terms of "information exchange" ([Berezkin 2015](#), p. 68) can be seen as a further extension of this concept. Emphasis on mythic knowledge leads mythology to be broadly inclusive, irrespective of where one delimits and defines myths within mythology. Nonetheless, myths defined as stories in other approaches become conceived as knowledge of mythic events that might be known through one or more traditional stories.

Mythic knowledge is formed through the organization of mythic symbols and relating these to the world. Units of mythic knowledge are formally approachable through mythic symbols of different types although they may lack a linear organization. For example, events of cosmogony are communicated and circulate in discourse as images, motifs and themes. Whereas narration necessarily organizes these in a linear sequence, they may form clusters or networks for which a particular narrative pattern is only a convention of a particular genre. Knowledge of the cosmogony may be organized in phases, but within each phase, the elements are more likely to form systems or merely be associated in groupings. Similarly, cosmological knowledge has a spatial dimension of organization in which sequencing may be no less important than in narration, although it is simultaneous in spite of temporal articulation. The sophistication of such knowledge nevertheless varies considerably in society: some people's knowledge may remain quite superficial while a specialist is more likely to develop nuanced understandings connected with his or her practices ([Converse 1964](#); [Wright 1998](#); [Stepanova 2012](#); [Frog 2015](#)). Nevertheless, most significant may be possession of knowledge-of rather than consistency with other specialists in its organization (cf. [Tarkka 2013](#), pp. 229–30), which becomes evident in a corpus where specialists' power appears to depend on personal agency and assertion of knowledge rather than on social consensus of what knowledge is "correct," with potential for variation increasing at each level of detail.

8. Breaking Free of the Mythology of Myth

Myth is a concept central to how we approach cultures today, yet the term and category have been shaped by their history in ways that, to use the term of Barthes, have naturalized us to a mythology of myth. The mythology of myth renders it fundamentally other, story rather than historical events or theory, aesthetic representation rather than informational content, symbolic expression rather than factual truth; it is myth as opposed to true knowledge. The naturalization of myth as other

reciprocally produces a myth that we have no myths, the myth of mythlessness, at which scholars have been chipping away for more than half a century. Although myth is valorized as symbolic expression, something that we can aesthetically enjoy, it is simultaneously devalued as false, like fictions other people have been foolish enough to believe in contrast to our own superior, true knowledge. This mythology of myth subtly impacts research on other cultures through the evaluative stance-taking built into the concept. Viewing myths of others from the hegemonic, authoritative position of modern Western culture is at odds with trends in research that seek to understand myths and the operation of mythology as they are perceived where they are found. The long-standing tendency to define myth in other cultures in terms of stories has also affected what is included in discussion and how mythology is extrapolated from source material. Deconstructing the history and current uses of the term and concept breaks down this mythology, allowing us to become conscious of biases and to redefine the concept to make it a more neutral and effective research tool.

Deconstructing the concept reveals that the criterion of story, a criterion that has been built into the idea of myth from the outset, is deeply integrated into the implicit othering in its use. We can quibble over how story is defined and reflect on how this criterion shapes the way that we look at data, yet the label story implicitly characterizes myth as something other than true knowledge and contrasts aesthetically organized symbolic representations with objective facts and history. Talking about certain types of stories as myths is practical and consistent with long-standing uses of the word. At the same time, using story as a criterion in defining myth has wide-ranging implications that demand careful reflection.

Semiotic approaches to myth brought into focus how myth works at the level of models for thinking about the world and experience. By placing emphasis on thinking models rather than stories, these approaches easily bridged the deixis of myth as a concept which exclusively projected myths as culturally other. Although some scholars continued to oppose myth to true knowledge, this opposition has been regarded as a “bias [that] must, however, be overcome” (Carnes 1967, p. 125). Semiotic approaches have been more effective in bridging the divide of othering, yet they have had difficulty penetrating into the study of myths in the classic sense of unique stories about gods or events in mythic time because they are not normally equipped to differentiate between what I have here described as centralized and decentralized mythic symbols.

Mythic discourse is a widely applicable framework for approaching mythology and how it is used in society. Turning attention from myth to the mythic has brought elements of mythology and practices into focus that had been neglected in other approaches. This turn has allowed significant advances in understanding how traditions related to mythology form, evolve, and operate in society. Different definitions of myth and mythology can be applied in the study of mythic discourse, but research since the rise of this approach in the 1990s has challenged ideas and ideologies built into many of those definitions.

From the preceding discussion, the most significant point to take away is that the term myth refers to a concept that can be defined in different ways, but that myth is a fundamentally modern term that we define according to the interests and needs of our research. There is no single authoritative definition of myth. Instead, a researcher can choose the definition best suited to his or her research. Crucial to making such a choice is awareness of the possible alternatives and their pros and cons. The term myth carries a lot of baggage, but it can be applied as a valuable and effective research tool. Amid the myriad of possible definitions, it also becomes imperative to explicitly state the definition you are using at the outset of your research.

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